



Chapter 1

On New Year's Day 1996 the residents of the isolated Ojibway community of Whitedog in northwestern Ontario were in the grips of a major crisis. There had been more suicides in 1995 than there had been in the last ten years. More and more young Ojibways had given up hope of having any reason to live. They wanted out. Permanently.

Over the last eleven months, there had been eight suicides and two unresolved deaths that appeared to have been the result of crime. Prior to this suicide cluster, there had been seven suicides over a ten-year period.

Between March 18 and April 22, 1995, for example, two brothers, a cousin and a close friend — all between the ages of 20 and 30 — committed suicide at Whitedog. Autopsies revealed high levels of alcohol and paint lacquer (fast-drying varnish) in their blood.

An article in the May 4, 1995, issue of *Wawatay News* said that Nodin Counselling Services of Sioux Lookout, Ojibway Tribal Family Services and Community Counselling of Kenora, and Wabaseemoong (Whitedog) Family Services had provided counsellors and crisis teams to help those who were grieving or having trouble coping.

Band member Louie Cameron and social services director Ron P. McDonald had spearheaded a project to pull the community of approximately 900 on the banks of the Winnipeg River about 95 kilometres northwest of Kenora together.

They had opened a 24-hour crisis intervention and counselling centre and

were coordinating a volunteer foot patrol 24 hours a day to keep an eye on popular lacquer sniffing and drinking haunts and to search the community for anyone at risk of committing suicide.

Elders and school staff were holding suicide prevention workshops and talking about the dangers of alcohol and solvent abuse. The crisis centre had become a safe place for young people or anyone else in the community who needed to talk. It was the focal point of the Ojibway community's effort to save lives.

Louie Cameron was quoted as saying: "It's a hopeful sign that people are taking the responsibility of looking after each other. People have put aside their individual differences and their religious beliefs and come together. Saving the lives of our young people has become more important We have to deal with the issues of self-respect, self-esteem and feeling good about the future to eradicate alcohol and solvent abuse."

In an interview with the *Winnipeg Free Press* at that time, Louie Cameron said: "From the time we are born, we are always mourning."

During an interview at Whitedog in 1996, Ron Roy McDonald, chief of the Islington Band of Saulteaux (the French name for the Ojibways), told me: "Lacquer is killing our young people and it's also affecting the community as a whole. What's happening right now as we speak, there is a subculture of lacquer sniffers, we call them sniffers. This is what I'm trying to target. I'm trying to eliminate that problem, people sniffing.

"It's impacting my community, this lacquer, and I mean it's total, what the government has done to our people here in Whitedog. It's forced them to live this way. It's forced them. It's like a genocide. It is a genocide. This is what they've done to our people."

Chief McDonald said approximately 80% of the people at Whitedog in 1996 were unemployed and relied on welfare assistance.

"Some of these [small] homes [lining both sides of the gravel road running parallel with the shoreline] have two or three families in there and that can cause chaos, if it's compounded with drinking, dependency on welfare, no jobs.

"And it's also affecting the community as a whole. For example, we had one incident about four or five years ago. One of our band members was high on this lacquer stuff and he went into the town of Keewatin and killed a female merchant. In our neighbouring community, Grassy Narrows, we be-

lieve the guy that shot the OPP [Ontario Provincial Police] officer in Grassy was under the influence of some form of lacquer or some form of substance.

“Right now, in fact, yesterday about this time, a man came in here [to the Band Council office]. I mean my office was just full of fumes in here, just by his presence. This is a full-grown man. He had lacquer breath on him. He wanted money. He said, ‘I need food. I need to buy stuff for my kids.’ Then, after the meeting, after he left, his uncle came by and said ‘I hope you didn’t give him any money.’ He’d go and buy some more lacquer. That’s why he wanted the money.”

Chief McDonald estimated that 10 to 20 per cent of the community — at the end of a dead-end gravel road that ran off the paved road to Kenora — were abusing solvents and other means of getting high. They ranged in age from 10-year-olds to people in their mid-30s.

He tried to deal with the problem by having the Ontario Provincial Police lay charges against the substance abusers. “They said, ‘no’. There is no law against lacquer. There is nothing criminal about having lacquer in your possession or even sniffing it for that matter. There’s nothing. There’s no criminal offence there so that’s the problem we’re having. Right now I’m trying to take steps with the court system in Kenora, with the authorities in Kenora, to help us combat the lacquer problem, to try and say to them, ‘OK, treat it as though it’s a liquor offence’. We want to eliminate the lacquer substance abuse problem in the community. That’s the main cause of trouble right now in the community is lacquer.”

He said the substance abuse problem at Whitedog started in the early 1970s – soon after they learned that their lakes and rivers had been poisoned with methylmercury.



Between 1962 and 1970, the pulp and paper mill operated by British-owned Reed International Ltd. at Dryden, about 170 kilometres directly southeast of Whitedog, dumped more than ten tons of raw mercury into the English-Wabigoon river system. Fish in the rivers had 33 to 50 times the accepted level of methylmercury, a highly toxic form of mercury. The fish were unsafe to eat by humans or animals.

In March, 1970, the government of Ontario ordered the company to stop dumping mercury into the river system and banned all commercial and sports fishing. Overnight, the people of Whitedog and the nearby Grassy Narrows reserve lost their two main sources of employment — guiding and commercial fishing — and their confidence in the safety of their food and water. More than 480 kilometres of a productive river ecosystem was expected to remain contaminated for 50 to 100 years.

Commercial fishermen at Whitedog and Grassy Narrows who had been making enough to pay their own way and have cash in their pockets lost their only source of livelihood and had to turn to welfare. The residents were forced to rely on fish trucked in from outside.

“We weren’t informed,” Josephine Mandamin, one of the elders at Whitedog, told me in 1996. “We didn’t hear. We didn’t see. It was instantaneous, instant type of thing with us. It just hit us one day. It must’ve been happening for years back before the government chose to let us know. I don’t believe that they weren’t aware of it, what the progress of the mercury was doing to the environment in our river system.

“I think they were quite aware of it but , from way back, we’ve always been looked at as second-class citizens, ‘the Indian people. Put them in their reservations and box them in and they won’t cause no problem.’ We never caused them any problem.”

There were signs of mercury poisoning early on. Diseased fish were found in the rivers and on the shores. Diseased cats and other fish-eating animals were also found. However, no one paid much attention to it at the time. The government officials certainly didn’t do or say anything about it.

“Now we’re trying to cope with the backlash of those doings by the governments,” Josephine said. “To this day, 1996, we’re still coping with the circumstances, the negative circumstances that arose from the doings of people who were careless with our livelihood, careless with our gifts from the Creator. The river, the water, is very sacred to us people. The trees. The rocks.”

How did she react when she first learned that the rivers and lakes had been poisoned?

“I suppose my first reaction was anger and then it turned into sadness and then it sort of worked itself out to acceptance because I had to accept what things I couldn’t turn around. Pollution is a big thing once it works itself

out. You almost never heal from it. The Japanese people got the worst end of it, the mercury poisoning in their country, and they came to share their circumstances with us.”

Josephine was referring to people from Minamata, Japan, who travelled all the way to Whitedog to share their experience with mercury poisoning and offer support and advice.

From 1932 to 1968, a chemical company dumped an estimated 27 tons of mercury compounds into Minamata Bay which is located on the island of Kyushu at the southwest corner of Japan. Thousands of people whose normal diet included fish from the bay unexpectedly developed symptoms of methylmercury poisoning. The illness became known as the “Minamata Disease”.

A doctor from the Chisso Corporation Hospital reported as early as May 1, 1956, that “an unclarified disease of the central nervous system has broken out.” He linked the disease to the fish the people of Minamata depended on for their daily food.

Victims were diagnosed as having a degeneration of the nervous system. Numbness occurred in their limbs and lips. Their speech became slurred, and their vision constricted. Some people had serious brain damage. Others lapsed into unconsciousness or suffered from involuntary movements. Some victims were thought to be insane when they began to shout uncontrollably.

From around 1950 onwards, cats had been seen to have convulsions, go mad and die. As the mercury destroyed their brains, they passed through a stage of crazed spinning and whirling. Locals called it the “cat dancing disease”, owing to their erratic movement. Finally, birds were strangely dropping from the sky. These unexplainable occurrences brought panic to Minamata.

Josephine Mandamin really appreciated the fact that the people from Minamata took time out from their devastated lives to travel to Whitedog and Grassy Narrows to show support and offer advice to the Ojibway people.

“They felt a kindness to share their circumstances with us. Most of the governmental bureaucrats at that time, I remember, were making fun of them. In fact, one MPP [Member of Provincial Parliament], Leo Bernier, who always had a problem with native people as far as trying to understand them, called them ‘the singing troubadours’, the Japanese people.

“And then we had a provincial health minister in those days, Dennis Timbrell, who made a comment: ‘Oh those people in Wabaseemong [Whitedog] and Grassy won’t die from pollution, from mercury poisoning. They’ll die from VD [venereal disease].’ A minister talking like that, it’s appalling. A health minister!”

The Japanese visitors informed them that mercury poisoning was an “invisible type of festering” that could take up to 35 years to surface.

“They said by that time you’ll probably have a high percentage of diabetes and problems with alcohol and the government ’ll love that much more because they’ll be able to blame that rather than the mercury poisoning,” Josephine told me. “Nevertheless, it will be mercury poisoning in the physical sense of it 26 years later or 36, or generations, future generations will be affected in the genes.”

Josephine’s husband Isaac, a former chief of the Islington Band of Saulteaux, told me that the Japanese people strongly advised them that it would be better to enter into negotiations with the government rather than trying to take the government or the British pulp and paper company to court.

“When the Japanese people were here,” Isaac said, “they said the only way you could prove that you’ve lost something over this contamination is through the mediation process because right now the government won’t move, you won’t get nothing if you have to take it to court. But, if you go through mediation, that’s the only way you’ll get something, some benefits out of it because right now at that time they said, nothing will really show up in the system until 20, 25 years, 30 years down the road. Then the symptoms will show up in the people and now that’s exactly what’s happening right now. Everything is coming up to the surface.”

By 1977, several residents of Whitedog were showing symptoms of the Minamata Disease — numbness in the limbs, trembling, inability to control their movements, hearing loss and tunnel vision.

Asked to what extent the problems the community was dealing with in 1996 were a direct result of the poisoning of their lakes and rivers with mercury from the British pulp and paper mill at Dryden, Isaac said:

“If you look at it before the mercury contamination here, well I’d say maybe two per cent of the people in the whole community were diabetics at that time. Now about 50 per cent of the whole community, all diabetic,

whether it's directly affected by the mercury we don't know, but nobody won't say.

"No, nobody's going to say a word. Because that's a true fact of the way the society operates. The government was trying to get all the tax money he can get from that giant paper company [in Dryden]. If you put a little pressure on that outfit, they pull out. Happens in every country. Then you're sitting there with an empty bag. So this all had a lot to do with economics at the same time."

There was no doubt in Isaac's mind that the poisoning of their lakes and rivers was having a devastating effect.

"My wife and I were having children during the discovery of mercury," Isaac said, "and our kids and their kids, those are the ones that are really having a hard time because you can see the stages where the symptoms will have shown up and this is exactly where the teenage population right now is. It's hit right now."

People sniffed gasoline in the 1970s in order to get high. And then, in the mid 1980s, they started sniffing paint thinner.



In the interview that she gave me at her spacious log home at Whitedog in 1996, Josephine Mandamin said she was highly suspicious of the white government and its white bureaucracy and had a lifetime of good reasons to feel that way.

"We see what's happening to the community at large," she said. "Alcohol abuse, the sniffing abuse, the solvent abuse, the violence against women and children. We are aware of it. We recognize it so we want to do things about it. So we [Band Council] make by-laws and resolutions and it gets bumped into the [Indian Affairs] agency. It can't get over that brick wall to get to the people that could do something about it, the Solicitor-General, the Premier, the Prime Minister, the ministers and that's how it is. We're concerned about the suppliers of, sellers of, lacquer and solvent abuse and alcohol, bootlegging."

However, because of the almost iron-clad control that the white bureaucrats at both the federal and provincial level exercised over the community, the people of Whitedog were often stymied in their efforts to deal with the problems.

“People who have control over other human beings want to keep that control and that’s where bureaucracy comes in,” Josephine said. “Bureaucracy, to me, is something I want to do without in the near future for the next generation of my people. I hate dealing with bureaucracy, the middleman. I think it would be more beneficial to everyone in this country if they had a government-to-government wheeling and dealing take place instead of always being consumed by paper work, by bureaucracy practices.”

Isaac cut in at that point. “You could have a minister wanting to do right but there’s always somebody there behind him giving him ideas. ‘No, no, no, you can’t do that.’ And this basically is what’s happening. It’s unfortunate, but that’s the name of the game. It is very hard for a lot of the people, the public, to know what’s going on. I’ve seen it happen. I’ve been inside the bureaucracy and I’ve been outside and I’ve been the chief and so on, so you get to know exactly where everything sits. It’s really hard for the public trying to find out whether it was right or not.”

“We always had the capacity of dealing with things,” Josephine said. “Cutting off the bud of a problem. But the allowance of trying to deal with it has never been allowed in Whitedog. We have so much resources that are not recognized. The elders, the family unit itself could be very helpful in prevention of the negativeness of alcohol abuse and sniffing, but it has never been allowed. When a crisis happens in Whitedog, oh gosh the resources people are there flying in soup, kicking up a lot of dust and then they blow away. There’s no follow. We’re still left holding this problem. We bump into so many negative walls and that’s where bureaucracy is, local ministries are at fault.

“There’s so many brick walls that we just find too defeating. We have to break those or go around them, find a way. We have to go around them and just keep on striving for what we envision. Reality has to kick in, acceptance has to kick in, hope has to kick in, respect, a lot of those things have to. Tolerance has to be there too because that’s the only way I can see.

“The boundaries that I love to talk about were not there in my day. The restrictions were not in my day, but they are now in reality so you have to find the capacity to work with those realities in order to accept and, from what little you have left, make it into a positive goal and vision and hope.”

Despite dropping out of school after Grade 3, Isaac Mandamin went on to become chief of the Islington Band of Saulteaux. He ran a successful

transportation business and politicians – including future Ontario Premier David Peterson – sought out his counsel and support.

“We had what you call the medical transportation business for 25 years,” Josephine said, “and, through our enterprise in the family, we managed to make a good living by tying up the whole caboodle of things, not allowing outsiders to tap into the business of doing field trips for the school and medical clients and other resources, agency, courts, driving them back and forth [to Kenora]. Yes we did make a good living.

“Isaac’s been chief off and on. In fact, when he first became chief he looked like he was still wet behind the ears, that’s how young he was, but very responsible. His background consists of good training. It may be so that his ancestors didn’t speak a word of English, but they were good trainers in life, perspective of things. So he’s been chief off and on quite a number of years.”

Considering the fact that she dropped out of school after Grade 2, Josephine Mandamin was remarkably knowledgeable and astute. She also had a delightful sense of herself.

“You know, Robert,” she once said with a mischievous smile. “Isaac and I are a very strange, unique couple. He’s strange and I’m unique.”

As far as Josephine was concerned, too many things were happening to create grief and hardships for Indian people in general and that had “created a lot of dissension, divisions in the community because of being afraid, scared.

“It’s not as if we’re united in this community. We’re not and I’m not blaming everything on the white people. I think it was way back allowing too much, having too much, trust and faith in very bad people who tend to be expert at obscuring truths. I think Indian Affairs has a lot to answer for, to correct some of the devious, conniving, undermining that went on because my people couldn’t speak English.

“We are at fault too because stupidity had a lot to do with it. That the great white father would take care of us. Never did. He never did. I don’t feel that I have any pride in the great Canadian standard. That’s why I feel that sometimes when they sing the national anthem I don’t want to stand up. What’s so glorious and free with the situation? Canada itself is glorious, but attitudes of Canada towards native people is something else.

“I don’t feel free in Canada. I have to abide to the piper and the piper comes in the shape and form of agency persons, bureaucrats, civil servants.

I resent being used as a scapegoat by those very people to make taxpayers angry that we are draining their tax dollars. That's bullshit. That's the public service that's doing that with great expertise and I mean that and I won't retract my opinion.

"When I heard about this [recent] visit of our Foreign Affairs Minister to Cuba to go and talk to Fidel Castro about human rights I started laughing my head off at the irony of it. 'Why you obviously bald-faced hypocrite, sanctimonious asshole,' I said. I wouldn't have the nerve to do that. I'd be ashamed and I was ashamed of him, Lloyd Axworthy, going to talk to Fidel Castro. If Fidel Castro were to come here under an invitation of a Canadian native, in spite of what he did, dictatorship, he was blunt about it. He didn't try and hide what he was. He never did. There's honesty in there. But our own politicians are dictators of great skill, ministers, program heads and they hide it, camouflage into another way. I think I would tend to put the halo on Fidel Castro, anoint him as a saint compared to what our people are basically, especially those who control Canadians."

Josephine believed that too many decisions were being made by the white bureaucrats and that the Ojibway people should have been allowed to take more responsibility for their own lives.

"The white man's perception of solutions for native people can backlash in a negative way," she said. "Take vandalism. Instead of trying to work out something with the community and the family, they immediately apprehended those kids and sent them to training school. That's where they got sniffing solvent abuse and more tricks on how to vandalize or steal. They brought that back with them and it had a very negative impact on native children.

"I'm paying a big price. I'm losing my future because of bureaucracy. I want to retain and I want to be allowed to be responsible for my own generation, next generation of the future, which is my kids, young people in Whitedog. I want to be allowed that, to be responsible, be allowed to make my mistakes and learn from it instead of rewinding itself time, time and again, revictimizing the young people in Whitedog and retraumatizing them over and over again for the sake of 'I know best.'

"They're taking responsibility away from the people in Whitedog and promoting alcoholism, alcohol abuse and sniffing abuse when they do that. We have to be allowed to handle or be given back our responsibility as far as

where our grassroots or reservations are concerned. I don't like local ministries for one thing. They have the gift of lying, fictions, not telling the truth. 'Oh, everything is fine in Whitedog. Everything is going well, we're on top of it.' Bullshit! They've never been on top of anything except taking control of other people's lives. Bureaucracy intervenes and prevents First Nations [the term applied to each of the more than 600 Indian bands scattered across Canada] being heard by the very people that could do something about it. We're just doing things from crisis to crisis to satisfy the bureaucrats and to make the general public not aware of what's really happening in First Nations."

Josephine mourned the loss of the past, the rich traditions through which the Ojibways celebrated their spirituality, lived off the land and survived the bitter cold of winter.

"Most of those things are gone by the great knowledge of the great white man knows what's best for everybody and these are gone now. But sometimes you have to face reality and learn to manoeuvre yourself and how to adapt to these changes and accept them and just integrate yourself and find ways of how to loop around negative surroundings."

Josephine said the Ojibway people themselves have the capacity to deal with many of the problems in their communities but are often sidelined by the white bureaucracy.

"We have a problem in most communities with alcohol, with solvent abuse, but like hell will we be allowed to work on those problems ourselves. There's too many false prophets, false messiahs, saviours that come in wolf's clothing. I think the survival of the native people should be allowance, tolerance from a dominant society. We can never, I guess, we'll have to try and seek that in ways we can co-manage, because basically everyone doesn't live in a rose garden. Everyone has problems, basically all cultures, but it's more pronounced in the Indian lives and I always thought that governments in general towards native people were very thoughtless, not understanding, not trying to understand."

While she had harsh words for the bureaucrats at Indian Affairs and the provincial ministries, she was also quite critical of the Indians employed at the local band office.

"They only do enough to justify a pay cheque. That's what it's all about. It has nothing to do with intervention, prevention. I think that's why we in

Whitedog have 80 per cent of diabetes which is mostly because there's no education about it."

She also lamented the lack of regular police presence in the community. "Justice is another thing that I'm really disappointed in. Trying to believe that we have 24 hours police service here. We don't. But, when something happens in the community, oh gosh they're here like the Fifth Cavalry in the boring Hollywood movie. That's the only time you'll see a uniform here."

While the Ontario Provincial Police employed some native officers, Josephine did not consider them to be effective.

"These are not recognized as policemen. Our own boys. They're more messengers. It all pertains to attitude. Sometimes I think the 1965 march we had in Kenora [more about this later] did improve and change a lot of things within the past years. It seems the general public in Kenora [a predominantly white town at the north end of the Lake of the Woods, about 140 kilometres north of the border between Canada and the United States] want to understand and apply some kindness, but it's the agencies that will never change. We're still having some hardship coming in from the court house, through the social services, from the police because of attitude. See that's what I mean. It's an attitude.

"And that's why I said we're a very enterprising commodity. We got to keep those white people working in the jails. If it starts to empty out alarmingly, then they'll go after the alcohol-related warrants to fill that jail up. Nothing ever kicks in in the support system pertaining to child and family services, pertaining to police, court or any social service. Nothing ever kicks in to support in the way of intervention and prevention.

"We're losing our future, how we envision it. We're losing the language. We're losing the right to connect with what the Creator gave us in the way of environment. We can't seem to have the right to protect it. Bell Canada comes any time they want to spray [pesticides]. The Ontario Hydro comes along any time they wish."

Josephine expressed deep concern about the increasing number of Ojibway children and young people who were being taken away from their families and placed in white foster homes or training schools.

"We, especially here in Whitedog, are losing our grip on the future and the way it's being done is by taking our future [children and youth] away

from this community and I think the worst crime that could be mentioned is taking the future from any community. The youth and the kids are supposed to have rights to safety and protection and bonding to their culture and language and they take them away.

“They abuse that right in the name of protection. They’re not protecting anybody, much less our kids. The child services people, CAS [Children’s Aid Society] or what have you, just come any time into the reserve with assistance of the provincial police and, in a very intimidating way, just take our children off the community to go to more confusion and hurt. In that way, we’re losing the grip to retain that control of our future because the [Ojibway] language is not going to be there when they come back.

“I don’t know how many lies have been written in the paper trail. Everything is so much justified on paper trails and most of them are pure fictional lies. Truths can be hidden by paper trails and there’s so much of that happening here in Whitedog pertaining to our kids being taken away from this community.

“We have people saying that Whitedog is not a safe place to live and is dangerous. Then what I am doing here? I, Josephine Mandamin, who has always looked at Wabaseemoong as a place of magic and mystery and beauty and a good place to live. If allowed. See, I’m not absent from the intimidation of everything that’s negative here, but I try to skirt around it. I have to live with it and I don’t mind so much of that from my own people that I share this community with. What I mind is the undermining, the negative attitude of those that are supposed to provide services for the people here in this community. The attitude of negativeness that comes from the justice system, the social services. That’s what I don’t like.

“At least in the [Indian] residential school setting we looked out for each other but, in the social services component, those kids are not having that protection. I’m always apprehensive about what’s happening to my future. They’re not here in this community. They’re away in a very negative environment.

“Nobody’s taking care of the children. Nobody cares. I hope someday the government will see and try to understand and be tolerant to the people, especially here in Wabaseemoong (Whitedog), that they should stop somewhere. They’ve already taken our land, poisoned our water, and now they’re taking our children.”



Chief Ron McDonald was just a young boy living at One Man Lake when Ontario Hydro flooded their homes in 1958. He has fond memories of the good life the Ojibways enjoyed before being forced to leave their homes and move to Whitedog.

“My dad used to get up at six, seven in the morning,” he once told me. “I remember that. I remember the nice fire he made every morning. I remember him going outside and sometimes the ducks would swim by, mallards would swim by, and he would shoot it and he’d be laughing and very happy about it and he’d tell my mom to have it ready for dinner.

“By that time, it was around eight o’clock, he’d be on the boat, gas tanks down the hill, wide open. The gas tanks hadn’t been touched. Nothing is hidden. Everything’s out in the open. He’d go out and do his business, come back, eat his meal with the family.

“Everybody’s happy, everybody’s talking, everybody’s been well fed and we start to wind down from the day’s work, like, washing dishes and all that. Everybody just talking and helping each other and getting ready for bed. There was no neighbour telling me to shut up or coming over to ask for a fight or to bother us.

“And then, all of a sudden, when we were forced to move to Whitedog, there’s a neighbour in every direction you look within ten, maybe 30 feet from us. We couldn’t put our boat down the hill, gas tanks wide open. Our gas tank would be gone, maybe even our motor. Somebody would’ve stolen it.

“My dad couldn’t shoot that duck if there was a duck landing outside. Couldn’t shoot him because we can’t fire a gun in public. We couldn’t sit down together as a family without a drunk pounding on our door or some guy, sniffed out [from inhaling gasoline or paint lacquer], bothering our family. Things like that. That’s the kind of way of life we had, the way of life that changed.

“Now it’s even gone worse. We have political interference now. We’re trying to live with the religious groups right now within the community, the Baptists, the Christians, the Evangelists or what have you. Our own people

fighting amongst each other just because of religion. Yeah, and this is the way of life that was taken away. The feeling that we had out in One Man Lake is not here anymore.

“What they did to the Indians is criminal. It was a criminal offence to do that, forcibly move somebody out like that. It’s almost like a war crime to me. It was totally unrealistic, unreasonable to move the people when they were already self-sufficient, when they were off their asses so to say. They were supporting themselves. They were self-reliant. They didn’t need welfare. They didn’t need grants.

“Before we moved here, we never had problems with lacquer. We never had problems with alcoholism and I don’t remember my friends ever being drunk up in One Man Lake. They never drank. We had a livelihood depending on commercial fishing. I remember even though I was only three, two three years old. I remember the way we lived.”

What would the advantage have been if they had not been forced out of One Man Lake?

“The advantage? I believe it would be self-sufficiency, independence, living again the way we did before.”

Josephine Mandamin shared Ron McDonald’s sense of loss.

“One Man Lake was very beautiful, beaches everywhere, a sustainable lifestyle was there,” she told me during the interview in 1996. “And then it got flooded in the name of progress. Here, no matter who was born in One Man Lake ended up being a Whitedog person.”

Josephine had fond memories of the early days out in the bush where she and Isaac used to trap beavers, pick blueberries and harvest the wild rice. It was a good life.

“We followed the nomads’ life in the fishing, the blueberry picking, the rice picking and the trapping. It was a beautiful way of life. When I say nomads, we were very traditional then. We survived, me and Isaac, when we first got married. We still practised the nomad life in trapping because he trapped for a living. In the summer, he guided in the tourist camps and that’s how we survived. We had settlements where we stayed like our log houses in Whitedog. Living like nomads, moving around, the freedom to move. There was always a learning experience in every place you went to.

“We had blueberries and chokecherries, all the berries and rabbits and

birds that you could eat, partridge and all that. The bounty in those days was terrific. Nobody sprayed our bounty with pesticides.

“Life had its own lessons and the connection we had with our environment, the thanksgiving we practised, often to give thanks to the Creator for what he provided, plenty of fish, no pollution and no restrictions.”

The Ojibway people would gather together during the summer blueberry season and exchange gifts to symbolize the bounty that the Creator had provided. There would be people from Shoal Lake, Grassy Narrows, Kenora, Swan Lake, Whitedog, One Man Lake and other communities. There were no boundaries, no segregation. Everybody was there for a reason, to pick blueberries during the day and enjoy poker, square dancing and good stuff like that after the sun went down.

What was life like in the harsh, biting, cold of Canada’s long winters?

“The winter?” Josephine asked. “Remember, I’m talking about days when surviving was a way of life for the Indian people. Welfare wasn’t there as yet, but, just on the basis of survival, we were more healthy in mind, spirit and body because we had to move to survive the winter, the trapping, the cleaning of pelts [furs], putting in the wood. So, in that way, I never considered it as a hard life. In fact, it was beneficial to the mind, spirit and the body.

“You didn’t have time to get fat for one thing. So, in that way, you had a much better life. Diabetes was unheard of. Substance abuse was unheard of. In those days, you could leave your things on the shoreline and nobody would touch them.”

They travelled by canoes, boats, horses, dog sleds and, sometimes, by bush plane. They would go to nearby white communities to buy things like sugar, lard, salt, flour, baking powder, and clothing.

“That’s all you needed in those days because we provided everything else ourselves,” Josephine said with a sense of nostalgia. “Life was more meaningful because we were living off the land for one thing. Welfare wasn’t as important because you had your pride, you had your integrity. You were proud that you were capable of living off the land and had the freedom to do so. It was a good life, yeah, but you got to face reality now. People still, young people especially, want to hurt themselves or go on sniffing [paint lacquer]. We have a community-based concern. Let’s put that fact on the table right now.”

Isaac Mandamin told me Ontario Hydro didn't warn the people that their homes were about to be flooded in 1958.

"They didn't even prepare anything, nothing was prepared at all. The people from the One Man Lake community were either out blueberry picking or [wild] rice picking. When they came back, all their stuff was floating around, coffins were floating around. Today [1996], we still haven't got a complete restored graveyard in One Man Lake. Partially it's done, but partially it's not there. We're still waiting to have that completed."

Chief McDonald recalled that, at the time of the flooding of 1,600 hectares which raised the level of One Man Lake by three metres, the pulp and paper company in Dryden – the same company that poisoned the lakes and rivers with mercury — wanted to expand its logging operations in the area.

"We were in the way and Ontario Hydro was the other company that wanted us out of there. Ontario Hydro, of course, as you know, wanted to build two dams in that area so we were in the way."

Both Josephine and Isaac Mandamin were critical of the government's decision to dump strangers from three different communities into one isolated spot and expect them to live together in harmony.

When they were living at One Man Lake, the families of the different clans lived separate from one another. The McDonalds would be in one spot and, an appropriate distance away, the Fishers would have their homes. The Henry and Land families would also have separate areas.

However, when the families from One Man Lake and Swan Lake were moved to Whitedog, they were all bunched together in cookie-cutter houses that followed the straight line of the newly-laid water and sewer pipes. The close living arrangement led to tension, conflict and violence.

"Why couldn't they have compensated us with land instead of boxing us in, boxing us in here [Whitedog]?" Josephine asked. "They must have been very sure that it would create a lot of tension, jealousy, competitiveness. They should have looked better at other alternatives because we used to get along better even then as neighbours.

"It seems like distance makes the heart fonder. You're not supposed to live together like the beavers in a beaver house [a cone-shaped lodge made of branches and mud with an underwater entrance]. You've got to have space to breathe and space to survive as best as you can and it was there [One Man

Lake]. But when it came time to unite, if there was death or danger or an issue that had to be dealt with, we came together. It was there. Now, it's not here."

Isaac Mandamin agreed. "Those communities were put together all in one so there was a lot of things that took place there. It's hard to put people together and expect them to get along right away. It's taken all this time. We still have differences today."

Isaac was still quite young when Ontario Hydro flooded the homes and built the two hydro electric generating stations.

"The community didn't have no input in the whole process in the beginning because Indian agents did everything.," he said, "and now Indian Affairs are saying that they haven't got nothing to do with it.

"But, actually, they're the people that negotiated on behalf of the community. There was no referendum whatsoever to see how we were doing, surviving, after the dams were put in and before that, when Hydro was forcing the people to move into the Whitedog community.

"Nobody, with the exception of about two families, was on welfare. Everybody was standing on their own. Everybody had a log house. The only thing that was given to them was the roof and the flooring, but they had to build everything by logs so that's how they were surviving and everybody looked after themselves."

"Our water used to be crystal clear in Whitedog and One Man Lake before Hydro came and we didn't benefit from Ontario Hydro. I'd like to make that clear," Josephine said. "While they were selling kilowatts to the general public, it was ten years after that we actually got electricity. Now we're trying to survive, trying to survive, striving to make things better for our future and it's a losing game now.

"You've heard recently, maybe in the media, we're losing our kids to suicide and their addiction to solvent abuse and our people's addiction to alcohol abuse. We recognize those things. But I would have much preferred if Ontario Hydro had treated us with more respect in a human approach type of courtesy or respect or caring, to compensate us more in a long-term economic development type of thing."

Josephine worried about the possibility that their homes might be flooded again.

"I strongly believe it could happen because it's right there. I live with it

all the time and the potential of something happening with the technology. Something could happen. We could all drown in hours. There's no provisions of insurance that that's not going to happen.

"We've got hydro dams situated on either side of us. They're treating us like animals when they have a reservoir right in the middle of the community. If we don't dance to their tune, they could easily flood Whitedog again with all of us in it."

Chief McDonald told me there was still a lot of resentment over the flooding of their homes and the forced relocation.

"Ever since they've been forced to move together, there's always been this political rivalry, social unrest, instability, rampant drug abuse, substance abuse, alcohol abuse, suicides ever since."

I suggested that asking the police or the courts to do something about the problem did not explain why so many people were getting lost in lacquer in the first place.

"We were forced to be on welfare," he replied. "And along with that came a lifestyle that wasn't conducive to the kind of lifestyle that we had before. Like, before we were forced to move [from One Man Lake and Swan Lake], we had our livelihood. We had a way of life which was fishing, trapping and seasonal work. What I mean by that, seasonal work, a lot of our people worked in [tourist] camps, as guides, different types of guiding like fish guiding or hunting guiding, hunting trips and all that.

"We survived through what I call an Indian or aboriginal diet. It's also interesting to note, at that time, they didn't have any diseases. I shouldn't say any disease. I'm saying like the kind of diseases we have today like, for example, diabetes. Here it's very, very, high right now in this community. Diabetes has just shot right up, right up through the roof and statistics show that this community is suffering another form of destruction, of genocide, whereby diabetes is widespread within our community now. We never had diabetes in those days. Maybe there was the odd case, but I'm saying not on a large scale where it affects the whole community.

"In those days, our diet was meats, wild meat, fresh meat, fish, berries, wild rice and that was our bread and butter. Now we're forced to eat a certain type of food. We're more sedentary. We're more, like, we're just like sitting ducks. We're asking for it sort of speak. Like we're just saying 'OK,

we're going to sit back and enjoy this free handout [welfare] and we're just going to sit tight and hopefully somebody will look after us.' This is what the mentality is. Welfare has a lot to do with that.

"When they killed a moose back in One Man Lake, they used to share. They used to share the moose with the community. Now you can't do that. You can't go to every house and share the moose. You can't do that. There's just too many people, you see, because there's three different communities, three different groups. There's bound to be conflict.

"Maybe the aggression that we're doing today is because we're sniffing out and we're showing violence and waste. Maybe that's our way of rebelling, like we don't agree with what they did to us. We don't agree with what the government did to us. The genocide.

"I believe they owe us. And it's not the money that's going to resolve a lot of the problems here. It's not the money. They can pump billions of dollars into this community and it's still not going to be the answer. What's going to be the answer is if we change the life and lives of each of the community members, to change their way of life.

"What we gave up at One Man Lake and Swan Lake we'll never replace. We'll never replace that with money, OK? Never. No matter how much they try to give us, whether it's \$50,000 for a baseball field or \$50 million for a land settlement, it's not going to do it. That's not the question. That's not the problem. What we gave up is the problem. What we gave up, what we're still giving up right now — our lives, our kids' lives. Yesterday, for example, somebody died because of complications from diabetes.

"There's the billions of dollars that they're making from our lands. This is what we gave up. The two hydro dams that sit between my communities. They're making billions of dollars profit. There's a difference here, millions and billions. So this is what I mean by money. Like the money part is nothing. This is what I'm saying, they'll never replace that and what they have to provide us is something that will impact our way of life for my community. For example, why couldn't they give us funding for education, more funding for education, specialized education? A lot of our children are special education needs students. They need that, remedial opportunities.

"When they took away our livelihood, fishing, commercial fishing [because of the mercury poisoning], I think they also took with them a way of

life. Our main staple was fish and they took that away from us and we have to find alternative ways of surviving now and the only way would be education. That's the only way out of the whole mess, is to provide the education opportunities for our children. Get them to become what they want to be. We need lawyers, doctors, etc. etc.

"That's the only way and we have to educate our adults too, our adult population. They have to go back to school. To become self-reliant you got to have the education background to try and survive in the white man's world. This is a white man's world and we have to use their tools and I believe their tools is education.

"I want to use education as a stepping stone, a starting point to where I want to get. I'm including all band members, not just students. I'm including those dropouts and I'm including those girls who got pregnant when they were in high school. They had to quit to take care of the baby, those kind of people and I believe they have to be included in the movement.

"This is what I'm trying to start: a movement where education is a vehicle for us to get back on our feet again. It's not going to happen overnight. At least we got to have a plan, a five-year plan, maybe even a ten-year plan, 20-year plan. What are we going to do for an education system here? This is where I'm trying to get our kids moving, start thinking that way."

I asked to what extent the government was prepared to accept responsibility for allowing the mercury from the paper mill to poison their rivers and lakes.

"Well, that's the other part of my argument," he replied. "I believe the government is all a big cover up. I sincerely believe that. I have community members in Whitedog right now that are suffering mercury-related diseases and the government is covering it up by saying 'Oh he or she is suffering from Lorenzo's Oil.' [a genetic disease that destroys the brain] Lorenzo's Oil? To me, it has to be proven that it is Lorenzo's Oil first. I want to see a Japanese doctor say that. I want to see a Japanese doctor come over to my community and confirm that this is Lorenzo's Oil."



Five residents of Whitedog were taken to a Winnipeg hospital in March, 1977, after becoming intoxicated sniffing gasoline at a party. They died in

the hospital shortly after arrival and autopsies were performed to determine the cause of death.

All five were known to eat fish from the poisoned river system on a regular basis and brain tissue samples were taken to determine if the methylmercury had affected their brains.

Area residents said it was essential that the tissue samples be tested to confirm their contention that mercury poisoning was a very real and present danger for the people living in Whitedog and Grassy Narrows.

The tests showed that damage had, indeed, been done to the brains.

According to a May 6, 1977, article in *The Winnipeg Free Press*, several residents at Whitedog were known to have the telltale signs of mercury poisoning — “numbness in the limbs, trembling, inability to control their movements and tunnel vision.” The article went on to say: “The federal and Ontario governments have been testing people but have yet to confirm one official case of the disease named after the Japanese chemical town where hundreds have died and thousands have been horribly crippled. In Minamata an industry dumped mercury into the sea from which the city took much of its food.”

Not surprisingly, the article said: “Government officials have indicated the problem is not as serious as the Indians seem to think it is.”

Dr Brian Wheatley of the federal health ministry appeared on a Global Television Network program around that time and said extensive tests were carried out on almost 100 Ojibways on the reserve in April and May of 1976 and 31 individuals exhibited symptoms which could be caused by mercury pollution. He said more extensive tests would have to be carried out to confirm it.



“I have a strong feeling that this is mercury related and all these diseases that’s cropping up right now, for example, diabetes, lacquer sniffing and all these things, social problems. It’s all related to mercury [poisoning], the mercury issue,” Chief McDonald told me.

“We’ve got a historical problem with the mercury and I’m also speaking for the Indians that are now affected by the mercury and why it is a problem. They [government officials] do a report on our students, like our school kids.

They tell us the problems, the behaviour problems, the academic shortcomings are not related to mercury at all. Why do they keep saying that? Every second page, 'mercury is not related to the issue here.' They're trying to escape their responsibilities. They're trying to run away from their responsibilities. They're trying to deny. They're denying what the problem is and, of course, when you deny something, it builds up. It comes out the wrong way and this is what we think."

"It sounds like a very sick recording," Josephine Mandamin told me. "What are they [government people] trying to say? Why keep repeating it? We know it has everything to do with the mercury, the sniffing, the alcohol. It has everything to do with it."

"They're giving us wrong information," Chief McDonald said. "They're giving us lies and they're giving us more ways of hurting ourselves. For example, the sniffing, the drinking, lack of housing, the water quality. We've been addressing that just about every day, trying to tell medical services, 'Hey, the water.' We gotta keep it at a certain level for safe drinking."

"This is what I mean by money will not replace what we're suffering right now. Money's not going to be the answer compared to what they're profiting. We've given up a lot for those things that they have so what we have to do is provide as much as we can to try and change the lives of our people, our young people particularly, and give them the opportunities, the learning experiences of education."

"Education is the key to turning this community around. Educating our young people, who they are, what they are, what they want to become, how they want to see the community change. That's the key — the school system. If we don't, we're just gonna have one vicious cycle of this lacquer sniffing and alcoholism."

"Right now, I'm just scratching the surface, see, right now, trying to change these people that are sniffing. Trying to change these people who are drinking their lives away. Trying to change these people of welfare mentality, the people who are saying to me, 'oh welfare will look after me'. We gotta change that frame of mind, that mentality."

He paused for a moment, scratched his head, and tried to figure out why the federal government was shipping fish into Whitedog from thousands of kilometres away in the Northwest Territories.

“Why is Medical Services [federal government] paying thousands of dollars for trout to send them over here all the way from the Northwest Territories? Why couldn't we do the same thing with land-locked lakes that are not affected with mercury? We're thinking about stocking lakes that aren't mercury infected. There are lakes close by.

“Why couldn't they provide our people with jobs to go into these lakes and grow fish farms and then, in turn, these fish farms could feed our people to supplement their diet? Why couldn't they do that rather than, like today, as we speak, our frozen trout comes from the Northwest Territories. By the time it gets here, by the time it hits the frying pans, it's freeze-dried. It's not fresh. The fish has been frozen as long as six months sometimes. We all know that if you try to cook something that's been frozen for a long time it doesn't have the natural taste and the proteins. The vitamins have all evaporated. Their kind of trout is a little bit different from our trout. Their kind of trout is much, much, bigger.

“The kind of trout that we're so used to living with is the smaller medium-sized trout so it makes more sense that we provide from our own local area. That's the kind of stuff I'd like to see our people in the future taking over. Why couldn't they pay us? And this is the thing I was getting at with the fish farm idea. We're kind of brought up with fish. Our diet and our way of life is with fish. We're sort of connected and so that's why I say fish farming would be feasible, reasonable economic development.”