

The Damage Close to Us

A Vision of the Devastation

in the Path of Akwesasne

- Jose Barreiro

This is one of the hardest articles I've ever tried to write.

It feels incomplete.

For days I tried to find an avenue of expression for all the material and perceptions that went through my head during the time I was researching it and every time that I thought I finally had it, I got sort of slammed in the head by the totality of what we are trying to do with this issue and how it is all so intricately manifested at Akwesasne.

What you have here is a people who are in the final stages of being asphyxiated. I am new here. I can't pretend to know a lot about the history or the economics of the culture or the religion of the Mohawk People, not the way that once, when it truly worked, it all overlapped and worked toward a unity that neither needed nor accepted these artificial separations. I can only look around now and see the broken pieces—the fragments.

I know that it has been a long process, and that it came in stages, slowly at first and then overwhelmingly fast, from all sides. I know that the religion got fragmented, the clans disrupted, the economic life continuously weakened. I know that many battles were fought, and that much was lost.

Now it is our sense of things that we are entering the final and most fundamental battle. It is one which the people of Akwesasne must face—are facing—but it is one in which they are not alone.

It is our sense of things that the monster that has surrounded us and penetrated every facet of our lives has now begun to devour itself.

We wonder: how far has the monster penetrated? Why is it so difficult to fight it? Why is it so difficult to stand apart?

* * * * *

I want to start at a store. This is a department store in Massena, a large town near the reservation.

It had dawned on me one day, as I was walking through the aisles that this was where, economically, the culture of the monster comes together.

People from all around here go to that store. They go to buy their needs. At the same time, multi-national corporations reach out across the world, extract labor, crops or natural resources and then package and ship them as products for us to buy there.

We do not see the process.

It struck me that this was at the root of our inability to act.

At the store you reach out for the can on the shelf and that very act connects you to hundreds, maybe thousands of people—a dozen situations—who knows what suffering—and you put it in your cart and you walk away. You do not think about whose lands may have been mined, or whose water may have been diverted for electricity, who stooped in what field or what mercury poisoning was spewed out by what paper company that made the paper for the label—no, there is no human way possible for you to think about any or all of that.

We have no choice.

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Then I started the drive back. This was interesting. I was driving a car and in fact had gone to the store to buy oil for it. I thought about that, and it was interesting because it pointed out how much we are all caught up in this. What we are beginning to get a handle on to fight, is a very pervasive thing. It is huge, and it is all around us.





I had gone to get oil for my car, as a shopper, like everyone else. In fact, the only difference between me and anyone else there was possibly that I was looking at the situation with altogether different eyes. The process, however, that I was involved in was the same as theirs. I was there because I drive a car which I have no way of making or running without the consequence of doing business with people who represent a way of organizing the world that I know is actively destroying life as we know it on this earth.

The trajectory of the drive back pointed out other extensions and fragmentations of the monster. This isn't unusual. The same evidence can be found along any stretch of road in North America.

The road runs parallel to the Raquette River as it flows into the St. Lawrence River and they both wind their way through the remaining lands of the Mohawk People.

To the left, there are the major plants. In quick succession: Alcoa, Reynolds, Chevrolet. They are each from a distance a tangle of wires and pipes, parking lots and clouds of billowing silver-gray smoke. They are all near the flowing water, as all such industry must be, and among them they control the lives of over 30,000 people.

At a couple of places along the road, the curve rises and you get a chance to sort of look over the shoulder of these big plants, and looking north and a little bit east you get glimpses of reservation land and particularly the chunk of it that is called Cornwall Island. How your eye looks at it at those spots is also the way the wind blows.

Across the river, at the turnoff on the road which leads you to the International Bridge, is a huge plant—a paper mill—called DOMTAR. It is also at the edge of the water. You can't see DOMTAR from this particular road, but on those rare days that the wind shifts its direction, you can smell it. There is no mistaking it; it is the scent of burning flesh.

This article is partly about how the waste from these industries is destroying the last remaining vestige of economic independence the Mohawk People have.

But it is more than that. It has to be more than that.

There is an insanity at the root of all this. It is a very powerful insanity, as complex as it is destructive—cancerous.

You see other things on that road, on that short stretch of road between Massena and Akwesasne.

There is a nursing "home"—a place where we end up leaving the old ones so they can await their deaths among the groans of others like them and at best, the manufactured, tired smile of a kindly stranger.

There is a campground/motel, where people from all over come to satisfy their irrepressible impulse to reconnect with living forms and every year the sign gets bigger which advertises "Full Hook-ups" and it is sad and pitiful to see the impotence with which the people park their huge trailers and carry out their TV sets.

" There is an insanity at the root of all this, as complex as it is destructive - cancerous "

Along the road there is a flat and extended concrete school—which is like the early age version of the nursing "home" and where once in a while some teacher gets the irrepressible urge to take the kids on an "expedition" to the old age "home" to "experience" what it is like to see the old and hear the "wisdom" of someone who is dying in irretrievable loneliness.

Finally, there are three different "Christian" churches and a large state park, named after Robert Moses, probably the single most destructive force in recent New York State history and there is, presently under construction a 345 kV power line which will form a semi-circle around the reservation after hooking up with a 765 kV power line, connecting Quebec to New York City and in the not too distant future probably to form the conduit for the energy generated by the seemingly inevitable Nuclear Power plants—which are the ultimate insanity, the end product of the evil—the death of the earth.

* * * * *

There is the "flouride problem". This has been going on for quite a while.

Just as you get past the Reynold's and Chevy plants is the turn off to the International Bridge to Canada. The turn off is a wide circle and as you head on across the Bridge you see Cornwall Island. It is half-way to Canada, in the middle of the St. Lawrence River and the bridge touches down on it before arching on.

On the surface of it the flouride problem boils down to this: The Reynolds Aluminum plant has tall smokestacks which everyday spew out wide clouds of a silver-grey matter. Within this matter is something called "flouride."

The plant spews out this stuff and the wind, which blows in a Northeasterly direction, carries it directly over Cornwall Island. Actually, it blows all over the reservation, settling over people's gardens and houses and kids—but it is Cornwall Island that gets the brunt of it. Now, a lot of people live on the Island. There is a school there, and folks are trying to raise some crops and a few people try to keep small herds of cattle.

For a few years now, the cattle have been dying. It seems the "flouride" settles on the vegetation, which the cows eat. The cows' teeth begin to decay. They can't chew and eat. It takes about three years and then they've had it. They get weak, too weak to feed their calves. The calves grow stunted. The calves' teeth begin to rot out.

In the winter time, when the water is cold, the cattle can't drink. It hurts their teeth. They can't chew the hay either. That, too, hurts them. They spit out half of what they take in. You have to shoot them.

All over the Island trees are dying. The maple was the first to go. It starts at the top of the tree and begins to eat its way down. At the top the tree keeps only the dead, bare branches, like a skeleton.

This has happened other places. They have a name for it: "skeletal flourosis."

It happened to some people in Hamilton, Ontario. There, the cattle's teeth also rotted, particularly the back teeth. The flouride also had effects on human beings. The symptoms: achy bones, chronic bronchitis, blurred vision, numbness around the mouth and fingers.

In 1955, a family of three in Troutdale, Oregon took ill with these symptoms and sued. The court found a definite relationship between the disease and flouride ingested from food grown in the area contaminated by an aluminum smelter.

Now, at Akwesasne, doctors and nurses have noticed a seemingly higher than normal number of complaints concerning aches in joints of limbs and more and more parents complain of skin rashes among their children.

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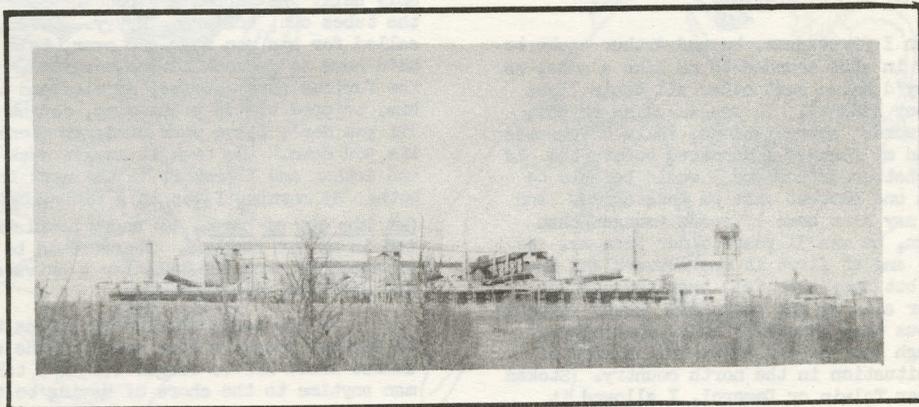
Coming back across the bridge and past the Reynold's plant you go onto the main road and toward the "American" side of Akwesasne, and once again, from the road, you see the sign. The signs are easy not to see; and they are easy to see. It all depends with what eyes you are looking. I was trying to look with eyes that wondered how the insanity manifested itself—how far it penetrated.

On the day that I had gone to the store in Massena, we had planned a visit to Joe and Hattie Mitchell. Joe and Hattie live in another, more remote corner of the reservation and the ride back from Massena and through the reservation to their isolated house gave a visual sense of what has happened here—the extent of the destruction.

It is possible to take that kind of a ride and not see anything. I've done it quite a few times. We have grown accustomed to the insanity and we have been taught to see with eyes that don't recognize it.

Maybe it is because it is so pervasive, so overwhelming.

cont P. 35 →



In the early 1950's, a system that has no sane concept of life and no respect for the immediate quality and identity of things decided to deny the St. Lawrence as a river and proceeded to rebuild it as a Seaway. Between 1954 and 1962 tons and tons of dynamite were used in hundreds of blasts to widen the waterway and the fishermen watched in outrage as thousands and thousands of fish floated, belly up, and drifted on the shore to rot.

Later came the dredging which raised silt which clogged the gills of the small fish, particularly the minnows and thus reducing the larger, edible fish.

Dams were built on the St. Lawrence and most of its tributaries and many of the deeper spawning areas were filled with the dirt left over from the dredging.

"Changed everything," Joe said, guiding the boat to this dock. "Used to be I catch big sturgeon—100 pound, maybe more. Not now. Now river dirty. Water dirty. Can't fish good. Fish dirty, too. Catch maybe one meal. No more."

Even "one meal" may be dangerous these days. For 41 years prior to the early 1970's (when one of the same governments that encouraged and benefits from the Seaway laid down "safer" standards) the DOMTAR-CELL paper milling plant—upstream from Akwesasne—pumped all its wastes into the river. Within it was a substantial amount of a chemical called "methyl-mercury."

This is the "mercury problem."

An expert toxicologist once put it this way: "If you dumped one tablespoon of mercury into a body of water the size of a football field, and fifteen feet deep, that would be enough to result in unsafe mercury levels in fish in that water; they wouldn't be fit to eat."

Mercury is first concentrated by the marine plants, then eaten by small marine animals which in turn are eaten by minnows, small fish, larger fish and so on. The large fish, such as the sturgeon that Joe used to catch and which are at the top of the food chain, ultimately have the most dangerous mercury levels.

The process of mercury contamination is expected to persist for fifty to one hundred years after the mercury is no longer being added to the water system. In some cases, it may even accumulate under silt deposits—there to sit like a time bomb until it is released by some disturbance—such as a large ship, or turbulent waters, or new dredging.

One study, done in 1975 by the Ontario Ministry of the Environment, collected 900 fish up and down stream from Cornwall. It reported dangerous levels of mercury contamination in pike, walleye, eels, smallmouth bass, and catfish. Other studies have also added pickerel, yellow perch, and rock bass to that list.

Different governmental agencies and even the St. Regis Band Council—which is the "Cana-



dian" side counterpart to the Elective System— are conducting further studies. But even existing studies are difficult to sift through. The supposed safety cut-off point is when contaminated fish exceed 0.5 parts of mercury per million parts of fish flesh. But who knows what that means? How much fish can one eat? Nobody really knows. Brain damage can be caused by minute amounts of mercury, and it takes years for all mercury to clear the human system.

"Only one thing is certain: the cows are dying and fewer and fewer people at Akwesasne are eating the fish."

Only one thing is certain: the cows are dying and fewer and fewer people at Akwesasne are eating the fish. Even fewer still look to the river as an economic provider. Like an old woman said: "What the hell is the use of fishing if you can't eat the fish? Better to buy it at the store."

* * * * *

We tied up the boat and walked on up to the house. On the way we passed the trunk of an old black ash, which is the tree that people around here pound in order to peel the strips that are used in the making of baskets.

Later, inside, Hattie showed us some baskets she had made. She makes them in the winter time, or on rainy days.

In the living room, Joe adjusted the wick of a kerosene lamp. Marie went down to the root cellar and brought up carrots, potatoes, and salt pork. The women cleared the kitchen. It is a simple, clean house. Looking out the back window, on the slopoto the river, you see a second garden, neatly planted.

"Use to be everybody plant," Joe said. "Then times change. Now wintertime come, people want to buy my potatoes, want to buy my corn. People want to buy everything."

It is interesting to watch them putting it together. "It seemed crazy," one said. "At first, we didn't know what we were getting into. Then we started looking deeper, comparing research. We still can't believe it."

They are finding out, for instance, that the 765 kV line will initially bring in power from the James Bay Hydro Project in Quebec, which in its path flooded out 6,000 Crees and Eskimos, destroying their fishing and hunting and trapping. They are finding out that dedicated, expert scientists working independently on shoestring budgets can document serious biological damage from the extreme voltage of the lines; they are finding out that the line is being built as an obvious precursor to nuclear power plants in the area; they are finding out that it is all related and that nobody in

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APPEARING AT

authority gives a damn about them—that they are simply "in the way."

Coming out of Sugar Bush and back on the main road there is a small grocery store. Last winter, the blizzard cut off its supply lines. It was interesting to watch. Day by day the shelves got emptier. People would come, look in, shake their heads.

I wonder if it reminded anybody.

* * * * *

On the main road one day, I drove the other way from Massena, away from the reservation. I was headed toward the Adirondack Mountains, where AKWESASNE NOTES has its land now. At a place, just past the town of Fort Covington, there was a crew of men on big cats and dump trucks. They were building the kV line.

A kV line is made to transport electricity—power—from one place to another. This particular line is a 765 kV—the largest one made.

On a map, as it is projected, the line is black and thick and it cuts arbitrarily down from Quebec, forms a semi-circle around Akwesasne all the way to Massena and then heads down to New York City.

One more problem. This one is called by the local newspapers, "the kV line controversy." It consists of this: as the line makes its way south, it cuts a 475 foot wide strip through whomever's land sits in the way. Most of the land is farmland.

An interesting process has taken place. In the past couple of years, PASNY—the Power Authority of the State of New York—which is the hat the monster is wearing on this occasion—knocked on the individual doors and began the cajoling and the threatening and sweet-talking which is the game that precedes the inevitable taking of the land.

Now the farmers are mad.

The PASNY men were arrogant. They came in with a great deal of force and the self-assurance of men who feel the superiority of their connections. They had the law on their side. The farmers compared lies and promises and trampled feelings.

This was the beginning. But the line was coming through whether you signed the PASNY papers or not and the farmers balked. Some tried to stop the construction, the cutting down of trees. Troopers arrested them.

One farmer said: "Now I know how the Indians feel."

The farmers and now other interested groups meet often. They do research. They work toward an injunction. They are fresh. You can feel their freshness.

The full implications of the James Bay Project and the problems of Native people in Northern Canada are just now coming to light in the rural counties of Northern New York. Eventually, those problems will affect everyone in the Northeast United States.

A few Indians from Akwesasne have lent a hand and as usual they were the first arrested and the most roughly treated. But most people are tired, confused. One man looked at the construction site one day and said: "Pay me the cash. I'd build it."

The magnitude of the penetration is overwhelming.

I headed back up the mountains one day, to our camp. From the road you could see the sun going down and the miles and miles of seemingly impenetrable woods. Now we find out that the milling companies have nearly opened them up again—the same companies that now supply DOMTAR with its pulpwood and that drive their loaded trucks through the reservation and under the kV lines and over the International Bridge to get there.

The road climbs around the mountains and it seems a safer place—a place with a future.

It is a fantasy. Up in the sky the easterly winds bring with them all the way from the pouring smokestacks of the Midwest the invisible acid rains—the ones that drop into the lakes up here and cut off the ovulation of the female fish, wiping them out.

No, there is no getting away. We have some thinking to do.

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