

EPILOGUE 2011

My first trip out from my home in James Bay in 1956 had been so traumatic that I never dreamed I would ever travel again after I left high school, let alone travel all over Canada and the States. On that first long, exhausting and terrifying journey to attend high school in Sault Ste. Marie, I thought I had reached the end of the world and could go no further. Once I learned or realized I really had not gone all that far from home and a whole new world was waiting for me to explore, I became more and more curious about other countries, cultures and other races and more willing and eager to travel great distances to satisfy my curiosity. My first goal was to find a job in British Columbia and settle there, but it was winter and it rained every day for the two weeks I was there, so I headed off to sunny California where I eventually settled, married and had children.

Two events that occurred simultaneously in the 1970s convinced me to return to James Bay after an absence of about twenty years. The first was the 1971 announcement by Quebec Premier Robert Bourassa of the “project of the century”, a project that would divert and dam many rivers in James Bay, the major one being *my* river—the Fort George River, also known as The Great or Big River, Chisasiibiistuuk and La Grande Rivière. I became somewhat of an activist and I felt I needed to help in any way I could to ensure that the Cree were getting a fair deal. The announcement had been made without any consultation with the Cree who lived in nine communities in the James Bay territory. One newspaper article mentioned that because there was a small band of Cree living in Mistissini, the Quebec government and the developers had decided to postpone the damming of the Nottaway and Broadback Rivers and to start with Phase I of the project by developing the Fort George River. No mention was made of my island, Fort George, at the mouth of the river or the Cree who were living there. Anyway, I was concerned enough to return home eventually and do something, anything, to help save my home and people.

I had tried many times previously to return to James Bay, but only if I had a job so I could help support myself and my family, but without any luck or success. When the project started, some Cree were able to find jobs with the developers and others with the Grand Council of the Crees, a political organization that oversaw the opposition to the project and led the negotiations to retain some rights to the land and to seek compensation for the loss of land and a way of life. I was lucky to get a job with the Cree, initially as a payroll clerk and eventually as an office manager and I continued to work for the Cree at the regional level for the next thirty years of my life.

The James Bay Hydroelectric Project has brought many changes to the land and to the people. Some of them are good and some not so good. Now gone is the pure crystal-clear water of the Chisasiibiistuuk, the Great or Big River, that flowed around the island of Fort George where I was born. Still the source of drinking water for the community, the river water now needs chlorine and other additives to make it clear and drinkable once again. Gone too is the river that was my childhood playground and served as the

highway to move my people from the coast of James Bay to their trap lines in the interior of Quebec. It is now nothing but a series of dams and reservoirs.

Gone, also, is the St. Philip's Indian and Eskimo Residential School where I spent eight years of my life. The building was demolished in the early 1960s and replaced by a new one with running water and indoor facilities. Now that school too is gone, demolished and buried under tons of earth and sand in 1980 when the residents of Fort George were relocated from the island to the new site of Chisasibi on the mainland. This relocation was a precaution against a major disaster should one or all of the dams break and the resulting flood waters wash away the island. Although this has not happened, yet, the increased flow in the river has speeded up the erosion of the banks of the island, so much so that twenty-five feet along various banks of the island have fallen into the river in the past five years. So the fears of the people were proven to be valid. However, residents of Chisasibi still return to the island every summer to gather and reminisce about the "good old days".

There are no more fish nets lining the shores of both forks of the river to feed the people because, after the James Bay Hydroelectric Project was completed, the fish in the reservoirs and river were found to have a high mercury content and the residents were cautioned against eating fish caught in those areas. Now we depend largely on store-bought food to feed ourselves: we have been told that these purchased foods and the more sedentary life we now live contribute to the increasing numbers of people with diabetes.

We now have paved and gravel highways to travel great distances, instead of paddling our canoes or using dog sleds or walking on snowshoes for days at a time. We now have water piped into our homes instead of going down to the river with our buckets to fetch water making endless trips on laundry days or for baths. We now have electric heating instead of chopping down trees with axes, splitting the logs and laying in cords and cords of wood to get us through the long cold winters. We are now connected technologically to the outside world instead of trying to listen to a radio station in "Wheeling, West Virginia" fade in and out in the evenings—if we were one of the lucky families to have a radio. We now have seven passenger flights a week instead of the once-a-week flights of float planes that used to land on the river to bring mail and necessities after break-up and freeze-up. We now have daily food transport service instead of once or twice a year when the Hudson's Bay Company freighters would arrive after July with a year's supply of food.

As with most positive results of any change or development, there are always trade-offs. In this case, unfortunately, the improved and easy access to the south has also contributed to the increase in social problems, such as those of alcohol and drug abuse. The social problems, of course, are now proven to stem from our residential school and other past experiences, but our isolation before the Project was a major deterrent in gaining access to mind-altering and addictive substances.

With the signing of the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement, we were able to control our lives. We now have our own school board, our own health board and our

own regional authority, instead of Indian Affairs determining our needs and destinies. Now Cree children in James Bay, whatever their gender, can follow their dreams and enter any field of their choice. With the closure of residential schools, children can now live at home while attending school from pre-kindergarten through secondary, leaving their home communities to attend college or university only when they are young adults.

The second event that made me return to James Bay was that I believed I had finally grown up. In all the years I had spent in residential school I had been told what to do practically every moment of my life. I was told when to eat, sleep, wash, bathe, use the facilities, play, pray, attend school and when to speak. The only things that could not be controlled were my breathing, dreams and my thoughts, although there was always great pressure to control the latter. The consequence of all this control over my life was that, about twelve years after I left the school, I became very independent and too stubborn at times. Once I realized I could control my own life, and that I could direct it better than those who had exerted total power over me in the past, I refused to let others dominate me or my life's direction. This new-found freedom spelled the end of my first marriage, but in retrospect I was not mature enough to deal with the situation in a more positive manner.

Once I had returned home, I was able to expand my horizons. For example, during my high school years at Shingwauk, Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, I had been told by counselors from Indian Affairs that I could not attend university to realize my dream of becoming a doctor, even though my grades had exceeded their expectations, because it would be a waste of money since I was just a girl and I would only end up getting married and having children. Eventually, however, I was finally able to go to university and obtain both Bachelor's and Master's Degrees, although not in the medical field that I had once chosen. But first I had to get over my fear that I was too old to return to school. I tested the waters by spending a year learning about computers and programming—this was before office and personal computers were the norm. When I had proven to myself that my mind was still functioning as well as that of any young student, I applied to university and completed my Bachelor's degree in Commerce (Finance) and my Master's degree in Business Administration—the first Cree, to my knowledge, to obtain those degrees. I would never have been able to return to school before the creation of the Cree School Board and I owe the Board a debt of gratitude for making it possible for me to fulfill part of my dreams.

Immediately after I graduated with my MBA, I obtained a job with the Cree School Board as the first and only woman ever to hold the top management and administrative position of Director General. A family situation forced me to leave this job that I truly loved, but I did not feel I had any other choice. I also held positions as a financial analyst for the Cree Board of Compensation, a company that manages the compensation funds from the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement, and as the Director General of Operations of the Cree Nation of Chisasibi. I have been retired for ten years, but I am more in demand now than when I was scraping pennies to feed my family, who are all grown now and supporting themselves. It is ironic and sad.

The negative impacts of my residential school years continued to crop up throughout my life. The major and most serious negative impact did not hit me until I had been a mother for several years. When my first child reached the age of six, I suddenly became confused about my role as a mother. What did other mothers do with children that age? How should I raise a six-year-old? How much freedom should I allow my child? What was permissible and what was not? Even though I thought I knew what I had been doing all along, I was almost paralyzed by self-doubts. The parenting book, *Baby and Child Care* by Dr. Benjamin Spock became my bible and I could not do anything with my child without consulting the relevant paragraphs or chapters first. It was an even more stressful time since I lived so far from my family. When I returned home and saw other mothers who had attended residential school going through the same confusion and insecurities, I arrived at some conclusions and discussed them with some friends who were teachers. My theory was that up until the time I had entered residential school, I had many parenting role models and, consequently, I had no problem raising my babies. From the time I entered residential school I was removed from my role models; therefore, I had nothing on which to base my own parenting skills and was suddenly lost. At that time, I had not heard anybody talk about the impacts of residential schools on those who had resided in them. Once I realized and believed that my parenting problems stemmed from my residential school years, I was able to teach myself how to become a relatively better and effective parent and how to trust and rely on my own instincts instead of trying to raise my children "by the book." I am grateful to my children for their tolerance and patience and for teaching me skills I needed at such an important time in their lives. In spite of some negative experiences in residential school and a few resulting weaknesses of character, I am grateful for the strengths that I developed during that period of my life.

I survived. I am proud of that. I can still laugh at myself and at most of what life has thrown in my way. The Elders always remind us that laughter is medicine and this has been proven to me many times. For example, in 1997 I was very ill for seven months with one disease after another and I was under doctor's care the whole time taking different medications but without any improvement in my health. In August of 1997 one of my daughters was graduating from her RCMP training in Regina but the doctor refused to let me go. I went anyway and after the ceremony my mother and I drove across country to visit the town where my daughter was going to be posted in British Columbia. My mother does not drive so I did all the driving. She does not travel much and she has weird ideas about everything so I laughed the whole way to B.C. and back. When I returned I had received urgent phone calls, notes and other messages from the doctor to go to her office immediately upon my return. I did and I was sent to radiology immediately, then to a lung specialist. The specialist told me the old x-ray showed I had had pneumonia and a collapsed lung but the one taken a few minutes before was clear with no sign of any disease. He asked if I had taken any medication and I told him I hadn't but I had laughed the whole time I was gone. And that is why I believe laughter is the best medicine for some ailments.