

# The Old One's

Chippewas of Rama First Nation

Ojibway Times August 2002

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The writing of this story was with caution and trepidation. Normally this ceremony would not be public. However, it is something we may not see again and because many who wanted to attend could not, this was written. No pictures were taken of the *Old One's* or their final resting place.

Many of you have followed the story in the Packet & Times regarding the remains found on Horse Shoe Valley farm that were believed to be Aboriginal. The developers followed standard protocol contacting the nearest First Nation, in this case Mnjikaning (Rama) After a series of phone calls, they contacted Cultural Liaison Officer, Mark Douglas who took Bernard Nelson and Bill Shilling to meet with the developers in the delicate matter of determining to whom the remains might belong. Upon examination they decided the remains were Ojibwe and not Huron in origin.

The Huron typically buried personal belongings with their dead and there were none discovered with the remains. The manner in which these people were buried is suggestive of the Wisconsin and Minnesota Ojibwe, particularly because of the placement of the remains in the egg shaped grave.

Dr. Dean Knight of Wilfred Laurier University was able only to determine, in the short time he had the remains, there were 11 different bodies and the remains were Aboriginal ranging in age from 2 months to 45 years.

It is generally believed 45 years was the life expectancy prior to this century due to difficult living conditions.

The next question that needed an answer for Mark and the others was if these 'Old One's', as they were now being referred to, should be moved. Since they were unsafe where they were due to development, it was decided to bring them to Mnjikaning. While

Mark, Bernard and Bill performed the Traditional Ceremonies, they were 'guided' to bring them to Chief's Island for reburial, where no one could disturb their sleep again.

As Chief and Council debated the best course of action regarding the burial, Mark and Bernard conducted the smudging and wrapping of the 'Old One's' in cotton representing in the Four Directions. The finished 'bundle' was about one and a half feet by five feet in length. They were placed in the Band Office boardroom to await internment. A few of the cleaning staff, who somehow missed the explanation, were startled more than once, by their presence.

Once the decision was made for the 'Old One's' to be taken to Chief's Island the proper place had to be found and prepared. Bernard led the journey explaining he would recognize the place *from his dreams* once he saw it, and he did. Terry Simcoe and John Snake participated in digging and clearing the way for the burial. Soon all was ready.

Mark, Bernard and Terry were first to head to the island with the 'Old One's' carefully laid on cedar boughs in the bottom of the aluminum boat. For those of us that could follow, the mood was solemn. Once we all reached shore, the entourage trekked up the overgrown incline about 100 meters inland. This part of the journey took about fifteen minutes.

The burial site was located between two large white pine trees, believed to be about 300 years old. Mark handed out the cedar boughs, which we stripped, and the needles placed in the bottom of the grave as a cushion.

Those attending the lakeside ceremony gathered in a small circle around the 'Old One's' and the Biidaanban Singers offered both a welcome song and a journey song. There was a definite flow of sweetness around the circle during the ceremonies. Mark spoke to the Old Ones and Ernie Sandy offered

a beautiful prayer in Ojibwe, which he has graciously translated for those who asked.

Bernard then conducted the traditional smudging ceremony for the participants, and prayers were offered on behalf of those remaking the journey to the Creator. The Traditional Pipe was then passed to the men of the group four times around, representing the Four Directions. The 'Old One's' were placed into the grave followed by more Cedar as well as Sweetgrass, Sage and Tobacco. A feast of sweets, berries, corn, and water followed the ceremony, and plates were made for the "Old One's" of bark and leaves which were placed close to the grave.

Each of the fifteen people that attended the reburial on Chief's Island spoke of their gratitude on being able to participate in such a special ceremony. John Snake said that he too was unsure of the rightness of 'disturbing their sleep' in the beginning.

He offered an ancient Chippewa Chief's song he felt was right for the ceremony.

The ancient song, the smell of the medicines, the wind rustling through the trees and the birds singing created the feeling of being back in time. As we left the island, each of us expressed feeling humbled by the experience.



Left to right: Ben Snache, John Snake and Chief Sharon Stinson Henry.



Left to right: Mark, Bernard and Terry



Mark Douglas



Coming home afterwards