

Interviewing Nookomis and Other Reflections: The Promise of Community Collaboration¹

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We are a people to whom understanding and knowledge comes by way of relationships - with the Creator, the past, the present, the future, life around us, each other, and within ourselves. And, like my ancestors, I am here on this earth to learn.²

Winona Wheeler's words have particular resonance for academic research conducted in Aboriginal communities. As an *Anishinabe kwe* and new scholar, I strive to meet the challenges inherent in blending accepted non-Aboriginal academic standards and practices with traditional ways of learning through storytelling.³ My interest in Aboriginal history stems from my own personal history,⁴ which has led me to embrace community-based approaches in my own work, as they hold a great deal of promise for new avenues of historical research into environmental topics and themes. By practicing community-based history, I have been able to reflect on historical methodologies, as well as on my own growth as a scholar and as a community member. Furthermore, the sharing of oral

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² Winona Wheeler, "Reflections on the Social Relations of Indigenous Oral Histories," *Walking a Tightrope: Aboriginal People and Their Representations*, eds. Ute Lischke and David T. McNab (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2005), 190.

³ Kathleen Absolon has written of how Indigenous scholars use Indigenous research methodologies in their academic work, and how those methodologies are intimately tied to a person's experience and knowledge. See "Kaandoswin, This is How We Come to Know! Indigenous Graduate Research in the Academy: Worldviews and Methodologies," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Toronto, 2008.

⁴ I am a member of the Serpent River First Nation (also known as Cutler or Genabaaajing), where many of my family members continue to live. I was raised in nearby Elliot Lake, Ontario. My mother is Andrea Leddy (née Lewis), an *Anishinabe kwe* from Cutler, and my father is Peter Leddy, who is from Elliot Lake and of Irish-Canadian descent. The two communities are joined by a history of environmental contamination of land and rivers as a result of Cold War uranium mining.

traditions that convey Traditional Ecological Knowledge [TEK] and environmental history not only provide promising avenues for research, but they often help revitalize community relations and traditions.

In recent years, scholars such as Julie Cruikshank, Jean-Guy Goulet, and Nancy Wachowich have written about aspects of the research process and their conversations with Aboriginal peoples.⁵ It is perhaps no surprise that methods and processes of community collaboration have come from the discipline of anthropology, but they have become more relevant to the practice of respectful and informative Aboriginal history. Aboriginal scholars from within the community and non-Aboriginals from beyond the community face fundamentally different issues in negotiating the research process.⁶ This paper reflects on my own experiences in conducting historical research on the Serpent River First Nation, of which I am also a member. This project has allowed me to better

⁵ See Julie Cruikshank, Angela Sidney, Kitty Smith and Annie Ned, *Life Lived Like a Story: Life Stories of Three Yukon Elders* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991) and *The Social Life of Stories: Narrative and Knowledge in the Yukon Territory* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998). Jean-Guy Goulet's method of radical participation is outlined in *Ways of Knowing: Experience, Knowledge, and Power Among the Dene Tha* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1998). See also Nancy Wachowich in collaboration with Apphia Agalakti Awa, Rhoda Kaukjak Katsak and Sandra Pikujak Katsak, *Saqiyuq: Stories From the Lives of Three Inuit Women* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1999). Kira Van Deusen examines Inuit storytelling in *Kiviuq: An Inuit Hero and His Siberian Cousins* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009).

⁶ See Winona Wheeler, "Reflections on the Social Relations of Indigenous Oral Histories" in *Walking a Tightrope: Aboriginal People and Their Representations*, eds. Ute Lischke and David T. McNab (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2005), 189-214 and "The Journals and Voices of a Church of England Native Catechist: Askenootow (Charles Pratt), 1851-1884" in *Reading Beyond Words: Contexts for Native History*, eds. Jennifer S.H. Brown and Elizabeth Vibert (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2003), 237-62. See also Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (New York: Zed Books Ltd., 1999), 140: "The research community has a number of terms which are used to good effect as exclusionary devices to dismiss the challenges made from the outside fold. Research can be judged as 'not rigorous', 'not robust', 'not real', 'not theorized', 'not valid', 'not reliable'. Sound conceptual understandings can falter when the research design is considered flawed. While researchers are trained to conform to the models provided for them, indigenous researchers have to meet these criteria as well as indigenous criteria which can judge research 'not useful', 'not indigenous', 'not friendly', 'not just'. Reconciling such views can be difficult. The indigenous agenda challenges indigenous researchers to work across these boundaries. It is a challenge which provides a focus and direction which helps in thinking through the complexities of indigenous research. At the same time the process is evolving as researchers working in this field dialogue and collaborate on shared concerns." See also Robert A. Innes, "Wait a Second. Who are you Anyways?: The Insider/Outsider Debate and American Indian Studies" *American Indian Quarterly* 33 no. 4 (Fall 2009): 440-61. Innes examines his own relationship to his community as an insider/outsider and argues that the debate surrounding this dynamic can be helpful for First Nations scholars examining historical issues at home and that First Nations studies is a discipline that can contribute to the larger discussion on the topic.

reconcile the relationship between my academic pursuits and the *Anishinabek* system of understanding that is inherently formed by our relationships with family and community, as well as by our collective sense of place and history. However, there is also tension between my position as a scholar and my role as a community member. Indigenous research “at home” raises some important questions about the insider/outsider dynamic: what happens when an Aboriginal academic completes the sometimes grueling, complicated, and (as will be discussed in this essay) culturally inappropriate university Research Ethics Board [REB] process and finally gets to begin her research? How do community perceptions and relationships influence the process of collecting oral histories according to non-Aboriginal academic standards?⁷

The area surrounding what is now Elliot Lake, Ontario, has long been seen as the home of the *Anishinabek* who now reside on the Serpent River First Nation, a reserve that falls under the Robinson-Huron Treaty of 1850. The Serpent River First Nation is located on the peninsula formed by the Serpent River and the north shore of Lake Huron, but our traditional territory encompasses present-day Elliot Lake. The Serpent River is part of a water system that was contaminated by mining operations near Elliot Lake that had a profound impact on the downstream reserve.⁸ Some families took their water from the river, and the fish and game upon which many community members still relied were seriously affected. The discovery of uranium in the area in the early 1950s had spawned the ‘Backdoor Staking Bee’ of 1953, which marked the beginning of intensive Cold War-era uranium exploitation in the area. Mines were established in what became known as the Improvement District of Elliot Lake,⁹ an intensely-planned urban development created through partnerships between the provincial government and mining companies. While it was the province involved in the development of the Improvement District, it was the Canadian government that pursued uranium contracts with the United States and was also responsible for the administration of Aboriginal communities in Canada. These two government interests have clashed

⁷ An example of the complexities of being both a community insider and an academic is Charles R. Menzies, “Stories from Home: First Nations, Land Claims and Euro-Canadians” *American Ethnologist* 21, no. 4 (November 1994): 776-91. He describes his background in a fishing family and his ties to home: “Unlike the ‘outsider’ anthropologist, whose leave-taking has a note of finality to it, my leave-taking has always been temporary. I am tied by my family into the life of the west-coast fishery. Each summer I end my sojourn in the metropolis and return home to fish.” (787). See also Charles R. Menzies, “Reflections on Research With, for, and Among Indigenous Peoples” *Canadian Journal of Native Education* 25, no. 1 (2001): 19-36.

⁸ “The flow of contaminated waters from the Pecors and Quirke Lake sub-basins results in contamination of the downstream reaches of the Serpent River.” A.C. Roy and W. Keller, *Status Report: Water Pollution in the Serpent River Basin* (Water Resources Assessment: Northeastern Region), 1976.

⁹ It then became known as the Town of Elliot Lake and is now the Corporation of the City of Elliot Lake.

on matters with respect to the Serpent River First Nation right down to the present day.

Furthermore, in the mid-1950s, Noranda Mines established a sulphuric acid plant on Serpent River First Nation territory to process uranium from Elliot Lake mines. The reserve land was leased to Noranda based on previous consent to lease the land to a lumber mill; therefore the extent to which this process held any real consideration for community consent and input was limited.¹⁰ The plant provided employment for members of the Serpent River First Nation, but when it suddenly ceased operations in the early 1960s and the ecological effects of sulphuric waste became apparent, this Aboriginal community was devastated. No effort was made to decommission the site until 1969, when it came to be seen as an eyesore detrimental to North Shore tourism. It took many years of legal action, public awareness and protest for the concerns of Serpent River First Nation members to be addressed.¹¹

I have examined the community's experience with mining and industrialization as part of a larger environmental history project, and have interviewed community members (most of them elders) to better understand our past and present struggles. Central to these discussions are questions surrounding environmental and political power relationships which have affected my reserve throughout the past half-century. Questions about the environmental and health consequences of the uranium industry, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relations, the importance of traditional uses of land and what happens when they are compromised by irresponsible environmental business practices have all been central to my discussions with members of the Serpent River First Nation. These community-based oral histories revolve around the environmental and political activism of First Nations peoples in the face of governmental and corporate opposition, making the process of collecting them a political act in itself. The Serpent River First Nation has recently filed a specific land claim for damage to reserve land as a result of environmental contamination.¹² The filing of the claim is the culmination of four years of work on the part of Chief and Council and hired researchers in collaboration with the Union of Ontario Indians. The litigation speaks not only to the ongoing political and legal importance of this issue, but also to the long journey our community has taken to demand compensation. It also adds a particular weight of responsibility to my own work:

¹⁰ Peter Johnston, interview with the author, Serpent River First Nation, 7 July 2009.

¹¹ An overview of these topics can be seen in Lorraine Rekmans, Keith Lewis and Anabel Dwyer, eds., *This is My Homeland: Stories of the effects of nuclear industries by people of the Serpent River First Nation and the north shore of Lake Huron* (Cutler, Ontario: Serpent River First Nation, 2003).

¹² "Letter to Community Members from Chief Isadore Day" *SRFN Community Newsletter* (Fall 2009), 3. The claim was filed 5 October 2009.

although it is not directly involved in land claims research, it has political implications.

Comprehending the present-day political situation means understanding the personal experiences shaped by the health and environmental impacts of industrialization. Before the discovery of uranium in the early 1950s, Aboriginal peoples still lived a largely traditional lifestyle, as full-time wage jobs were not common. The reserve had a history of farming and forestry and had had a lumber mill located on the reserve, but by and large most people continued to hunt, fish, and trap to support their families, or at least supplement their occupations with these pursuits. Many remember the gardens that were common in the area, which were another way that community members interacted with the land and depended upon it. These relationships were characterized by family activities that benefitted the community through the responsible use of resources. Arnelda Jacobs describes life before the acid plant and demonstrates the richness of personal, lived experiences that were apparent in many of the interviews:

We had a community and we lived off the land. And everybody helped each other. There was these [inaudible], planted a garden and some of the people had horses, they come and plough garden [...]. The people [did] their own weeding ... of the garden. And when it was time to hoe the garden the neighbours would come in now and help hoe the garden. Potatoes, and stuff like that. And when my grandparents lived where the trading post is now, eh, and they had chickens, pigs, and [...] I used to go down there every Sunday. I lived up here and my grandparents had two daughters and their daughters had families. One daughter lived in Spanish and the other lived in Cutler [another name for the reserve]. So we'd go down there every Sunday for chicken and dumplings. And we'd eat. [...] When the plant came in, it changed our lives.¹³

This section of the interview provided insight not only into how people fed their families, but also in the ways community members interacted with the land, and how these actions fostered relationships with their families and neighbours. The social aspect of living off the land was an important part of community life.

Arnelda also recalled the sharp contrast of life before and after the establishment of the acid plant, which brought rapid change to the reserve both socially and environmentally. The wage economy changed the way community members interacted with their environment, as pollution in the Serpent River from the mines to the north and effluent from the acid plant into Aird Bay on Lake

¹³ Arnelda Jacobs, interview with the author, Serpent River First Nation, 8 July 2009.

Huron changed fishing and hunting habits. Fishing close to the community in the bay was no longer an option, as both the population and quality of fish were compromised. Peter Johnston recalled the process of making sulphuric acid and the effect it had on the water in the bay in the community:

P.J.: I mean the whole process required a lot, *a lot* of water at different points in the process. And again the water was used for different things, mostly for food. But there was always, always a mixing of the water with the gases and the sulphuric acid before it became sulphuric. And this became a waste product that ended up in the waste that went out to the lake. And so you had very low pH water going out to the lake, which killed the fish. And the vegetation, anything that was part of wherever this stuff came out. We had all of that kind of stuff.

L.L.: So was there a shortage of fish, or did it change how the fish were?

P.J.: Well, I think that what happened is that there used to be it used to be common to fish close by and then as the effects of the effluent from the plant over the years got worse and it accumulated in the lake, the fish just couldn't take it anymore and the ones that didn't die just didn't come in, they weren't there anymore. They found other places that were more habitable to live in. And so you didn't have the fish in the lake anymore that you used to have.¹⁴

One indication that it was not only a question of a diminishing quantity of fish, but also of the resource's quality is Valerie Commanda's description of a change in the texture of the fish at the time of the plant's operation: "I know the lake there is – they say the fish is no good there, eh. It's soft, eh. For a while there it used to be – I don't know about now. But the fish went soft."¹⁵ The fact that this important resource was no longer suitable for consumption due to pollution in the Aird Bay is significant, as it either changed what people ate or their methods and patterns of fishing, resulting in them having to go further out on the lake.

This concern was also apparent in Terry and Betty Jacobs' recollection of the pollution made by the plant and a subsequent failed fishing expedition on the bay:

T.J.: The dyke was about - oh maybe, like you say - 400 yards, maybe not, maybe 100 yards in diameter, maybe 8 feet deep in some places. They made a dyke out of it so they could drain it and hold it. But it

¹⁴ Peter Johnston, interview with the author, Serpent River First Nation, 7 July 2009.

¹⁵ Valerie Commanda, interview with the author, Serpent River First Nation, 7 July 2009.

didn't hold all of it. It had to, it leached out somewhere. It contaminated the whole bay as well as the fish.

L.L.: So could you tell by the fish that they weren't right, or –

T.J.: Well, uh, some people did test fish. Got it tested, eh? [...] Betty and I went just out in the bay, not too far, where it emptied into the bay. We got a nice bass. One of those nice ones. In the evening, eh? I thought when we go home we're going to cook that right away, eh? And we tried, I tried it but, it tasted like it was rotten. [...] Yeah, and it was fresh, eh.

B.J.: We just caught it.

T.J.: I'm wondering how the fish itself survives. I know she cooked it like usual, fried it up.

L.L.: It wasn't your fault. [laughter]

T.J.: You know I said this don't taste right, put it in the garbage. We were so disappointed.¹⁶

The Cutler Acid Plant had waste disposal practices that severely altered the water quality in the bay, and by extension, the fishing practices that had been common in the community.¹⁷ Elders interviewed recall with a sense of loss the change in the resources upon which they had relied for generations.

While the pollution in the bay changed the fishing resources available to the community, mining also had a significant impact on resources in the Serpent River watershed. The diminishment of resources brought changes to hunting and trapping practices. Terry and Betty Jacobs described the change in the river system upon which they had depended for so long:

T.J.: A lot of leaching came from Elliot Lake. All the water emptied into the Serpent River, eh? Came right down. I remember first of all when I was a young fella I could swim in the Serpent River and it didn't matter if the water was really 4 or 6 feet deep. You see right down to the bottom. The stones down below, they looked like jewels. It was very, very clean. But since the mines started, a lot of their leaching emptied into the Serpent River. The bottom of that Serpent River was just like a greyish gunk, eh? And I guess that had to be all from Elliot Lake. And it's still not – after being closed for so many years – it's still not completely cleaned up. Yeah, that water used to be good for drinking, swimming, washing, washing your clothes. And, I

¹⁶ Terry and Betty Jacobs, interview with the author, Serpent River First Nation, 8 December 2008.

¹⁷ It was not only the fishing that was affected in this area. There were reports of serious eye and skin problems in children who swam in the bay.

guess all the animals in the area, that was their source of drinking water as well. The animal population went down, eh?
B.J.: Yeah. His Dad had a little trapping cabin [...] just at Black Creek. [...] And he had to quit, eh? [inaudible] Even the fur – he was trying to do whatever they do to skin the beaver – broke right off. [...] Even the fur was no good.¹⁸

The river, which had provided food, water, and recreational opportunities for the Serpent River *Anishinabek* had been completely altered by the uranium mining operations upstream. At one point, the community was even told by health officials that they should refrain from drinking water and eating fish from the river.¹⁹ And once the plant closed and wages disappeared, it was too late to return to traditional practices as resources were compromised by industrial pollution.

The vegetation in the area was also severely impacted. Just as crystal clear rivers had vanished, so too had the trees and plants in certain areas of the reserves. Interviewees consistently speak of the changes occurring over the course of their lifetimes. The fumes from the sulphuric acid plant's roaster took a heavy toll on the local vegetation: "So it took all the trees, the northern wind used to blow south and it used to affect the trees, the plantation [plants]. There was no trees up there on the side of the hill."²⁰ Indeed, Noranda had paid the reserve compensation for the loss of their vegetation and funded several reforestation efforts in the early 1960s, none of which were successful until the plant finally closed in 1963-64.²¹ The gardens were severely compromised by these fumes, as were the cars, homes, and even the clothes left to dry on the line.²²

Nearly all of those interviewed correlate the health of the community with the health of land and animals, and speak about the endangerment of traditional practices. But it is important to note that the community has revitalized past practices as much as possible, due in no small part to continuing dialogue and oral traditions. A renewed sense of history and heritage has contributed to fostering community relations, particularly between elders and youth, through ceremonies and celebrations. Many are still concerned about the uranium tailings dammed upstream near Elliot Lake, and there continue to be ongoing political processes to

¹⁸ Terry and Betty Jacobs, interview with the author, Serpent River First Nation, 8 December 2008.

¹⁹ Gertrude Lewis, interview with the author, Serpent River First Nation, 22 February 2008. See also Mick Lowe, "Children's Bathing Suits Turned Brown: Ontario Government Accused of Indifference to 20 Years of Pollution in Serpent River" *Globe and Mail*, 30 September 1976, 10.

²⁰ Arnelda Jacobs, interview with the author, Serpent River First Nation, 8 July 2009.

²¹ LAC, RG 10, Volume 11353, File 493/20-11-7 "Agreement between Noranda Mines and Chief and Council, Serpent River Band" dated 19 October 1959. Further correspondence describes these efforts and motivations in detail. See LAC, RG 10, Volume 11353, File 13/20-11-8 Part 1.

²² Interviews with Gertrude Lewis, Arnelda Jacobs, and Valerie Commanda.

reclaim the land, but people continue to fish and hunt where possible and share their resources with elders. In working with community members, it is readily apparent that remembering and retelling history continues to be a significant form of social and political interaction, while fostering the relationships through which we learn. Moreover, I recognize how these interviews have influenced me in more ways than merely a researcher wanting to learn more: I have become part of that process whereby the past renews the present.

The role of storytelling in the retention of community history and culture cannot be overstated. Not only is storytelling our traditional method of sharing information, but it is also an important way for Indigenous peoples to be active participants and recognized experts in academic research. The interviews described above have been invaluable to my dissertation research, and give a strong sense of rapid change in the community, as well as significant loss of resources. The history conveyed through these conversations is that of lived experience formed by the community's relationship with the environment, mining companies, and the government. These themes are central to the community's history and define what it means to be a member of the Serpent River First Nation. As a child, I remember wondering why my *Nookomis* – that is, my grandmother – Gertrude Lewis, had a photograph of the acid plant on her bedroom wall. For her and many other elders, the acid plant is a complex but inescapably central element of their personal narratives. For *Nookomis*, it was where her husband worked and a source of income; it was the cause of community devastation; and it symbolized more than half a century of community struggle and political activism. She continues to speak with pride about her role as a community leader and a mother in this history.

It is therefore not surprising that many of the community leaders and protesters who spearheaded efforts to decommission the acid site properly were women. At the time, Loreena Lewis was chief and Gertrude Lewis a councillor. They and other community women were active in making formal complaints, meeting with mining and government officials, and organizing protests. They made presentations to the Environmental Assessment Board when there were plans to expand mining operations at Elliot Lake in the 1970s.²³ Chief Lewis corresponded with government officials regarding water quality on the reserve.²⁴ Both Chief Lewis and Gertrude Lewis toured the tailings ponds, despite warnings

²³ Gertrude Lewis made a presentation to the Environmental Assessment Board, which evaluated the possibility of expanding mining operations in the area. "Chief Accuses Mines of 'Wrecking River System,'" *Sault Star*, 4 August 1977, 12. Although the article refers to her as the chief, she was there as a councillor and a representative of the community.

²⁴ Archives of Ontario, RG 12-45, B141785, "Serpent River." See also Rekmans, Lewis and Dwyer, eds., particularly the section entitled, "I wanted to be Chief because I wanted to be there for the people. But those council women really made me work," 91-96.

against doing so. They witnessed firsthand the problems with fish and wildlife in the region, as they came across animal carcasses throughout the tailings area they toured.²⁵ While the female elders I interviewed retold their stories as community members and mothers, the documents and reports written at the time indicate that some of them also operated as respected leaders in the public sphere. Their motivations for running for political office were linked very strongly to their roles as community members and as women.

My first interview, therefore, was with Mrs. Gertrude Lewis - *Nookomis*.²⁶ I did not expect this to be an easy task; I defer to her not only because of her status as a participant, elder, and community member, but also because she is our family's matriarch. This familiarity simultaneously helped in approaching her for the interview and made questioning her more awkward. The informal conversations we had always enjoyed were now to be modified by a microphone and a consent form. I had always sought to learn from her as an *Anishinabe kwe*; now I would be learning as a scholar. As Dakota oral historian Angela Cavender Wilson has stated, "the intimate hours I spent with my grandmother listening to her stories are reflections of more than a simple education process. The stories handed down from grandmother to granddaughter are rooted in a deep sense of kinship responsibility, a responsibility that relays a culture, an identity, and a sense of belonging essential to my life."²⁷ That sense of personal responsibility was heightened by my awareness that I now also had a professional responsibility.

It is not uncommon for participant interviews with Aboriginal people to take the form of more informal conversations than highly-structured question and answer sessions. Besides being culturally-appropriate, this helps in a practical sense to put the participant more at ease with the process. My grandmother's kitchen table – with Happy the dog trying to jump on my lap, and visitors coming in and out – was the setting for my first interview.

My grandmother began with expressions of reservation about using the tape recorder and the idea of transcription. This is perhaps not that surprising, given the unfortunate history of academic research in Aboriginal communities before collaboration was even a consideration for most scholars. Her hesitation stemmed from how my need to record the conversation differed from the way that traditional knowledge is usually passed on within the community. It did not help that my tape recorder is a large, imposing black audio-cassette recorder. Also, I

²⁵ Ibid, 92. This story was also told during my interview with Gertrude Lewis.

²⁶ For another example of the collaborative process and the grandmother-granddaughter relationship, see Stacey Zembrzycki, "Sharing Authority with Baba," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 43, no. 1 (Winter 2009): 219-38.

²⁷ "Grandmother to Granddaughter: Generations of Dakota Family," *Natives and Academics: Researching and Writing About American Indians*, ed. Devon A. Mihesuah (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 27.

quickly learned that *Nookomis* does not like the sound of her voice on tape and did not want it to be heard by others.

Indeed, her concern with the tape recorder was a troubling aspect of my interview experience. The fact that I needed to respect my grandmother's wishes both as her granddaughter and as a researcher meant that I had to adapt my preferred method of gathering historical evidence to accepted kin and community expectations. At one point, *Nookomis* asked that I turn off the tape recorder, and I, of course, complied. She was speaking about a difference in leadership between men and women in the 1970s and 1980s and chose not to be quoted on the record about her thoughts on the matter. However, she had little concern about being recorded while criticizing the present community leadership. This reflects her status as an elder, as she has not shied away from making these criticisms known in the community.

My grandmother also expressed concerns about her interview transcription. She worried about the inclusion of hesitations, inelegancies of speech, or even emotional reactions – including laughter. Native humour is known for seeming to make light of serious situations, and her telling of environmental and health threats faced by the Serpent River First Nation was no exception.²⁸ Speaking about an interview experience she had with a previous researcher, Grandma outlined her annoyance that the transcription insertions “[laughter]” or “[giggle]” suggested she did not take the situation seriously: “I don’t know if [the researcher] ever did put it in the library, ‘cause I just asked that the giggles be taken out of it. It didn’t sound too serious you know, because I mean we were serious about this contamination of our area, eh? We were really serious: it was no laughing matter to us. But talking about it, there were too many giggles.”²⁹ I had to promise to exclude such notations in the transcription, because our interview – bonded by family – contained a great deal of laughter and humour. The points at which she laughed have been noted below only to demonstrate this point about Aboriginal humour and the interview process, but they have been removed from the transcript in accordance with her wishes.

At the beginning of the interview, *Nookomis* told of sending her children to swim in the Serpent River because the water ran clear, while the water in the bay on Lake Huron where they used to swim was visibly contaminated:

²⁸ For more on Aboriginal humour, see Roger Spielmann, *You're So Fat!: Exploring Ojibwe Discourse* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998) especially “‘What’s So Funny?’: Humour, Laughter, and Teasing in Ojibwe Storytelling,” 107-28. Drew Hayden Taylor examines non-Aboriginal responses to Aboriginal humour in “Seeing Red: The Stoic Whiteman and Non-Native Humour,” *Walking a Tightrope: Aboriginal Peoples and their Representations*, eds. Ute Lischke and David T. McNab (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2005), 21-8. See also Drew Hayden Taylor ed., *Me Funny* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2005) and the works of Thomas King.

²⁹ Gertrude Lewis, interview with the author, Serpent River First Nation, 22 February 2008.

We thought the water was so dirty down here and they were breaking out, you know they had sores on them so instead of swimming there they went up to the Serpent River and the Serpent River was nice and clear [laughter] and we thought, oh, they're safe up there [laughter]. I used to drive them up the back of that road down the hill here and drop them off - there was a bridge back there. And they'd all go swimming there and here we found that there was radium 226 in that river! We weren't supposed to use that water at all! [laughter]³⁰

The memory of one's children swimming in a contaminated river was not comical, yet the absurdity of the situation made the interview subject – and the interviewer – laugh. Although it was clear throughout the interview that *Nookomis* was deeply upset about the contamination and the government's unwillingness to address the problem, she sometimes communicated her feelings through humour.

Overall, my close kin relationship with the community's historical political structure assisted my research; to my surprise, in turn it also deepened my experience as a band member. Most striking throughout the interview process was the willingness for community members to share their personal experiences with me. They spoke as elders, family members, and fellow stakeholders in our community's future. They spoke not as subjects to be studied, but as respected community leaders with valuable historical knowledge. They took the time to share their words, experiences and expertise, and this in turn created a great deal of responsibility for an historian and a community member, as I am accountable for how I relay their knowledge and our community's history to the academic community and, hopefully, to a wider audience.

Another powerful and unexpected aspect of the oral history experience was the possibility of protecting our community's cultural resources. The oral traditions that were passed on through my dissertation research—and certainly the TEK shared throughout the learning process—were instrumental in my development as a community member. These interviews demonstrate an important aspect of our community and culture in general, and I hope that other youth and young adults will continue to ask questions of our elders and protect the valuable knowledge and relationships that we have. In terms of my own role in this process, I will be depositing both the transcriptions and digital copies of the interviews of consenting participants in our library for the future use and enjoyment of the community.

This process has also made me more aware of the need to change some university processes to increase collaboration between Aboriginal academics and First Nations communities. One of the most glaring examples is the need for

³⁰ Ibid.

ethical research processes to take the insider/outsider dynamic as well as cultural differences into account. The university ethical research process is an important and necessary way to ensure that scholars comply with accepted research practices and to protect vulnerable groups from mistreatment. Yet the process itself can make historical research in Aboriginal communities more difficult when the researcher themselves is Indigenous. For example, the ethics process defines Aboriginal people as a “vulnerable group,” which by implication positions the researcher as representative of a less-vulnerable group. This is problematic when the researcher, too, is Aboriginal. It creates a distance between the interviewee and researcher where none existed before, a distance that is harmful both to the interview and to the career and cultural aspirations of the Aboriginal researcher.

At the same time, the actual methodologies of conducting ethical oral history are further problematized by the insider/outsider dynamic. For instance, at the beginning of the interview process, it is necessary for the scholar to present a consent form to the interviewee in order to protect that individual’s rights and to clearly define the ways in which their personal histories can be used by the interviewer in their own research. Yet the consent form’s legalistic language proved to be very daunting for First Nations participants to read, all of whom had varying levels of non-Aboriginal education. This is, of course, a problem which confronts researchers working with many vulnerable groups from various socio-economic, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds. Yet the process is most complex for the Aboriginal historian working on her or his own community. In my case, in order to foster understanding and to ensure that my interviewees understood their rights and my obligations to them, I endeavoured to verbally explain terms like “risk and your rights,” “loss of privacy,” “publication,” and “confidentiality.” Yet these terms and headings are complex concepts which are often inconsistent with Aboriginal ways of knowing. As these terms were often foreign to their experiences and knowledge, the interviewees looked to me as a *community member*—rather than an outside scholar—to interpret their meaning. While I was explaining the consent form to one interviewee, he interrupted me to say simply “I trust you” and then signed the form. This trust was based on his familiarity with me in my role as a community member and was not predicated on my academic credentials or his knowledge of my adherence to university ethical research processes. While I am honoured as a community member to be trusted by my elders, I am nevertheless concerned by the ethical implications raised by these interactions.

The concept of free and informed consent is an important part of the ethical research process; consent must always be obtained to protect the interests of both parties to the interview. But the lengthy written document—verbose and legalistic—was useless to this purpose in an interaction between two Aboriginal community members who both have culturally-specific ways of safeguarding

trust, especially as one depended upon the other for comprehension. The fact that I was interviewing mostly elders added another level of complexity: while they are the people who hold the most community knowledge and history, I had to identify my university credentials and role as a researcher, which had no bearing on my role as a community member. I was there to learn from the elders' expertise rather than the other way around. Our ways of knowing are dependent upon our experiences and traditional relationships, but I also had to ask about things I had read in books, articles, and archival documents written mostly by non-*Anishinabe* people. Thus, in some cases where interviewees signed the form out of trust and a verbal interaction rather than through an understanding of the written text, the actual form itself did not fulfill its role – the existing community relationship and the ethical duties that define it took the place of any written consent in the mind of some of the interviewees. Some scholars have already recognized the need to incorporate oral consent, where appropriate, into accepted university research ethics practices, as this is more consistent with how First Nations people learn and communicate.³¹ It will thus safeguard this particular “vulnerable” group more effectively and respectfully.

The Research Ethics Board process did not align well with Aboriginal practice in other ways. For example, I attempted to follow the commonly accepted Indigenous protocol of giving tobacco and a small cash payment to elders in recognition of their expertise and gift of time. However, the REB, although well-intentioned, was concerned about the amount of money involved and if the prospect of payment might skew participation. In practice, rather than encouraging people to come forward and thus skewing participation, the honorarium was a pleasant surprise to those who had taken the time to share their knowledge with me. In order to demonstrate to the REB that this practice was not done to manipulate or unduly encourage participation, but was in fact a specific social protocol that I was expected to fulfill as a community member seeking knowledge, I clarified the cultural importance of the practice through additional communications. In other words, I had to position myself more clearly as a community member with the additional role as researcher.

The university ethics process would benefit from cross-cultural policy building.³² The process of conducting ethical research is extremely important, and

³¹ Carolyn Ells and Shawna Gutfreund, “Myths about Qualitative Research and the *Tri-Council Policy Statement*” *Canadian Journal of Sociology/ Cahiers Canadiens de sociologie* 31, no. 3 (2006): 361-73.

³² There are other scholars who are making the same call for enhancements to existing research relationships. Linda Tuhiwai Smith writes, “the research approach has to address seriously, the cultural ground rules of respect, of working with communities, of sharing processes and knowledge,” 191. In 1996, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples made recommendations for embracing and acknowledging Aboriginal historical models when addressing the cross-cultural relationship. Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples *Volume 1 - Looking Forward Looking*

is essential to building bridges between Aboriginal communities and the academy. It is also essential, however, to ensure that the process is not so formal as to be intimidating to Aboriginal participants.³³ It should also be more aware of the fact that as more and more Indigenous scholars conduct work in their own communities, the needs being served by such policies are rapidly changing and so too should these practices. We have our own methodologies and ethical practices that are intimately tied to our social roles and expectations. Just as there have been calls to broaden accepted scholarly methodologies to incorporate Indigenous paradigms, the research ethics process should be more willing to do the same.³⁴

The relationship between researcher and community member was not only complicated by the REB process, but also by potential clashes between my two

Back, "Chapter 3 - Conceptions of History"; "Appendix A: Summary of Recommendations Volumes 1-5," and in particular, recommendations 1.7.1 and 1.7.2. See also "Appendix E: Ethical Guidelines for Research." RCAP, *Royal Commission Report on Aboriginal Peoples*, <http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/ap/rrc-eng.asp> <accessed 20 October 2009>. The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada has made Aboriginal research a strategic priority and a discussion paper acknowledges the importance of Indigenous perspectives: "Aboriginal research is more a method of study than an area of study. In its emerging conception, 'Aboriginal research' is research that derives its dynamic from traditions of thought and experience developed among and in partnership with Aboriginal nations in Canada and other parts of the world." SSHRC and Craig McNaughton and Daryl Rock, "Opportunities in Aboriginal Research: Results of SSHRC's Dialogue on Research and Aboriginal Peoples," unpublished paper, SSHRC, October 2003, http://www.sshrc.ca/SITE/apply-demande/background-reseignements/aboriginal_backgrounder_e.pdf <accessed 20 October 2009>. Although the Tri-Council Policy Statement for ethical research with Aboriginal groups states that they have not had the opportunity to consult Aboriginal stakeholders and therefore have not crafted a formal policy, they instead offer best practices based on the literature in the area. A clear policy for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal scholars alike is necessary to accommodate cross-cultural research and collaboration. This should be based on consultation with scholars and Aboriginal communities in order to best address this issue. Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans*, 1998 (with 2000, 2002, 2005 amendments) <http://www.pre.ethics.gc.ca/eng/policy-politique/tcps-epfc/> <accessed 20 October 2009>. See page 6.1.

³³ More and more Indigenous communities are taking control over the research that is conducted within their populations. It is now customary to contact Chief and Council to secure their support before proceeding with participant interviews and other research. Some also have an application process for researchers to complete prior to granting a band council resolution. See, for example, *Guidelines for Ethical Aboriginal Research*, or GEAR, a model developed by stakeholders in Aboriginal communities on Manitoulin Island: Research Review Committee, "Guidelines for Ethical Aboriginal Research" Noojmowin Teg Health Centre website, <http://www.noojmowin-teg.ca/default5.aspx?l=1,613> <accessed 10 October 2009>. Although this is a health research model for Aboriginal communities, it has relevance for researchers in other fields.

³⁴ Kathleen Absolon's dissertation discusses Indigenous methodologies and ethical practices at length. "Kaandosswin, This is How We Come to Know! Indigenous Graduate Research in the Academy: Worldviews and Methodologies," 2008.

roles. As a community and family member, I had grown up with the legacy of uranium exploitation and the acid plant and as a result was very aware of this history. I had expected to find that the Department of Indian Affairs had forced the establishment of the acid plant on the community. Through the interview process, I found that this does not seem to be the whole story. There is no doubt that there was a lack of transparency that resulted in the community being left with a legacy of poison; however, the story is not as black and white as I had anticipated.³⁵ Instead, there were several meetings held in the community where people were consulted about the possibility of establishing the plant there. All but a few people were in favour, as it meant economic development for the area and tangible incomes for a population that needed them badly.³⁶

However, this does not change the end result – that the community had requested independent legal representation, which was denied them by Indian Affairs, who instead assured them that departmental lawyers would suffice. As a result of this uneven relationship, the community then had to wait for decades for the site to be decommissioned. Certainly, community members could not have foreseen the extent of the damage that would occur, and at the very beginning actually welcomed the mine as an economic development opportunity. It is not surprising that growing Aboriginal families, surrounded by economic boom in non-Aboriginal communities, sought jobs. It does not indicate consent for long-term environmental destruction and health consequences, nor does it change the fact that the federal government failed in its fiduciary duty to the community for decades in forcing us to wait so long to reclaim the land. In fact, the land remains unclaimed. The interview process and research relationships have been a benefit to me personally as a community member, but at the same time, they have also forced me to confront my own assumptions as a researcher. This was an important

³⁵ There is a growing literature about Indigenous communities and mining in Canada. See Saleem Ali, *Mining, the Environment, and Indigenous Development Conflicts* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2003); Ellen Bielawski, *Rogue Diamonds: The Rush for Northern Riches on Dene Land* (Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 2003); Ginger Gibson and Deanna Kemp, "Corporate Engagement with Indigenous Women in the Minerals Industry: Making Space for Theory," *Earth Matters: Indigenous Peoples, the Extractive Industries and Corporate Social Responsibility*, eds. Ciaran O'Faircheallaigh and Saleem Ali (Aizlewood's Mill, UK: Greenleaf Publishing Ltd., 2008), 104-22; Ginger Gibson and Jason Klinck, "Canada's Resilient North: The Impact of Mining on Aboriginal Communities" *Pimatisiwin*, 3, no. 1 (2005): 114-40; Arn Keeling and John Sandlos, "Environmental Justice Goes Underground? Historical Notes from Canada's Northern Mining Frontier" *Environmental Justice* 2, no. 3 (2009): 117-25; Liza Piper, *The Industrial Transformation of Subarctic Canada* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2008); Shirley Tsetta, Ginger Gibson, Linda McDevitt and Sarah Plotner, "Telling a Story of Change the Dene Way: Indicators for Monitoring in Diamond Impacted Communities" *Pimatisiwin* 3, no. 1 (2005): 59-69.

³⁶ Gertrude Lewis, interview with the author, Serpent River First Nation, 22 February 2008; Terry and Betty Jacobs, interview with the author, Serpent River First Nation, 8 December 2008.

lesson, and it has prepared me for other surprises I may encounter as I conduct more participant interviews and archival research. Scholars of Aboriginal history have debated the victim/actor dichotomy in recent years³⁷ and as more work is done, it will become more apparent that this is a gray area. In fact, a dichotomous view of Aboriginal history is becoming an inadequate framework to examine such questions. Oral history provides the meaningful opportunity to see beyond the contentious issue itself and shed light on the personal lived experiences and relationships that are the foundation of our understanding of the world.

As more Indigenous people conduct academic research in their communities – and thus choose topics that have tremendous personal meaning – we will continue to negotiate our roles as scholars and community members. Kin and community ties will continue to play a role in research conducted by Indigenous scholars, and more of us are incorporating Indigenous methodologies such as oral traditions into our work and demanding academic recognition of them. Our ways of knowing are defined by our relationships and personal experiences, which is why the practice of oral history can be integrated with our systems of learning. That said, blending academic practices and Indigenous knowledge is not always easy. It can be challenging to juggle scholarly expectations with community roles and responsibilities, but that negotiation possesses a great deal of promise as well. The role of community member can enhance the academic experience, as one's community may provide support, enthusiasm, and encouragement for community-based research. Indigenous methodologies can enrich historical and cultural understanding for both the individual researcher and the academy. Non-Aboriginal researchers conducting oral history in First Nations communities will no doubt experience the research relationship differently than their Indigenous counterparts, and it would serve them well to try to understand First Nations protocols and expectations. Finally, as more First Nations scholars undertake this path of learning and research within our own communities, there is the chance to rebuild a long-lost trust between Indigenous communities and the academy. For the Indigenous researcher and community member, the responsibility of seeking greater understanding and incorporating oral traditions is a necessary part of decolonizing the academy. On a personal level, I will continue to record these conversations at kitchen tables when given the opportunity, and I expect to share much more laughter with *Nookomis* in the process. Perhaps most importantly, I will continue to negotiate my roles as

³⁷ A well-known example of this debate is J.R. Miller, "Owen Glendower, Hotspur and Canadian Indian Policy," *Sweet Promises: A Reader on Indian-White Relations in Canada*, ed. J.R. Miller (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 323-52; and R. Jarvis Brownlie and Mary Ellen Kelm, "Desperately Seeking Absolution: Native Agency as Colonialist Alibi?" *Canadian Historical Review*, 75, no. 4 (1994): 543-56.

daughter, granddaughter, auntie, niece, cousin, community member, and academic historian.