

Resistance to Coexistence

by Monique Michaud

With a population of 5 000, not only is Kahnawake the largest of the three Mohawk communities — the others being Akwesasne and Kanesatake — but it is also the largest aboriginal village in Québec. It is located eight kilometres south-west of Montréal; every day, hundreds of vehicles cross its land, to or from the Mercier bridge. Many large arteries channel traffic through its semi-rural, semi-urban landscape. The Saint Lawrence Seaway, which allows vessels to bypass the Lachine rapids and navigate up to the Great Lakes, can be seen from the village. To build the seaway, in the 1950s, the federal government had to expropriate a little more than five square kilometres of land belonging to the people of Kahnawake.

The heirs of the people of the Longhouse speak English and Mohawk, and practice the Catholic faith for the most part. The official political structure, the Band Council,

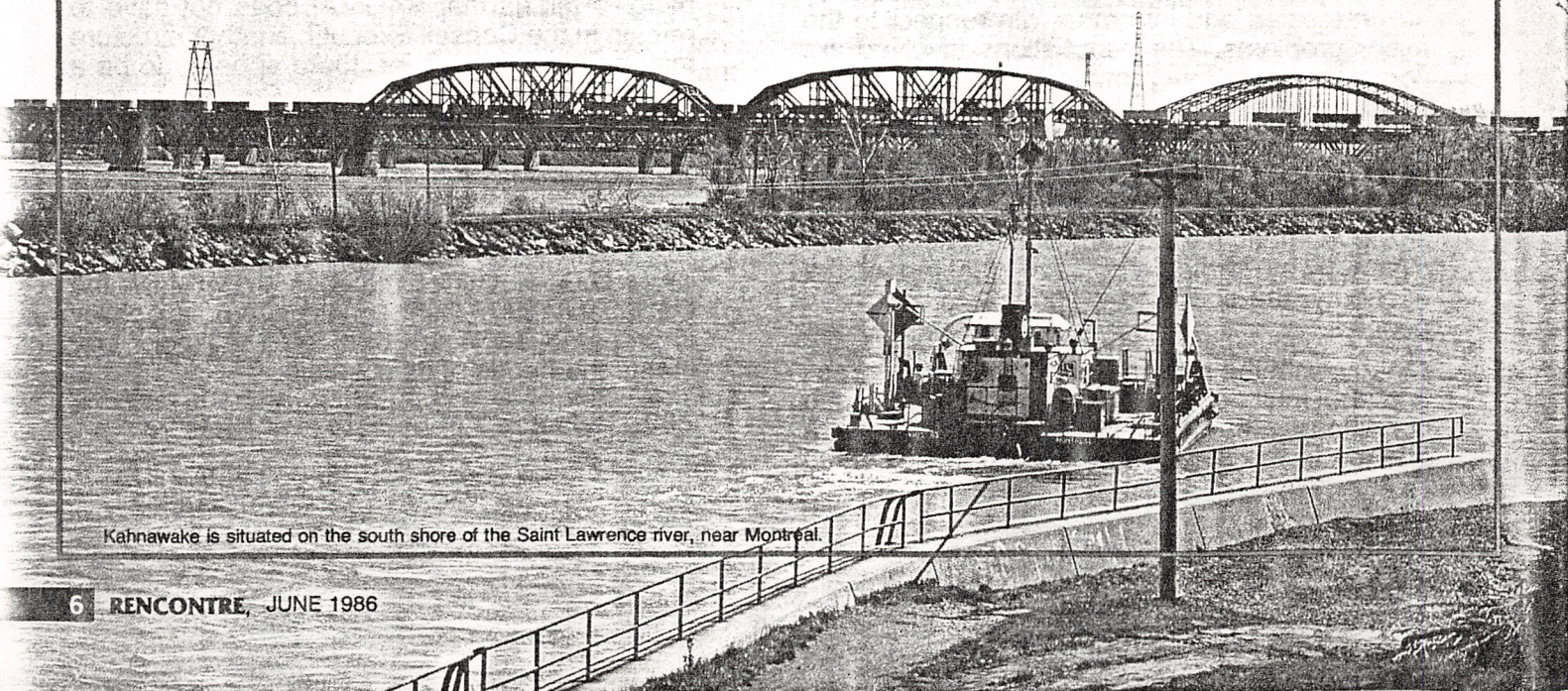
works in parallel with traditional Mohawk power, based on the clan system. It is said that within this both religious and political movement, women still wield real power.

And yet, much has changed in Kahnawake over the past ten years. The community is now largely in control of its educational system. The Survival School, founded in 1977, provides secondary education focusing on Mohawk culture and traditions. A cultural centre has also been set up, as well as a community radio station, CKRK-FM, which broadcasts Mohawk language and culture. The village has had its own police force for a number of years, and most social services are administered by Mohawks, on site. Finally, Kahnawake will soon have its new hospital, thanks to an agreement reached in 1984 between the Mohawks and Québec.

Among Québec's aboriginal nations and communities, the Mohawks of Kahnawake appear to be a political force not only because they are numerous, but also

because of their willingness to take their own destiny in hand.

Grand Chief Joseph Norton was elected to lead the Band Council in 1981. He compares the political structure he heads to a small government. "The coming years will be very important for the aboriginal nations of Québec, with respect to the type of relations that will be established between them and the rest of Québec society", maintains the Grand Chief. He feels the agreement Kahnawake and Québec signed in 1984 concerning the construction of a hospital represents much more than just a contract. It is a political accord. "What is important, is the way the agreement was reached, namely, on a government to government basis. The spirit of the understanding is of capital importance, because recognition of a Mohawk government is at issue."



Kahnawake is situated on the south shore of the Saint Lawrence river, near Montréal.



Grand Chief Joseph Norton compares the political structure he directs to a small government.

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Responsibility for health care

Under the agreement, the Band Council is responsible for health care. Québec has agreed to cover the cost of building the hospital, almost \$5 million, as well as its operating costs.

The Kateri Memorial Hospital Centre replaces the century-old hospital which no longer satisfied the needs of the population. The new hospital is scheduled to open this summer. It has 43 beds and will employ about 80 people, all of them Mohawks with a few exceptions. In addition to providing extended care to some thirty chronically ill patients, the hospital will provide community health, out-patient clinic, minor emergency, dental clinic and ophthalmologic services.

June Delisle, the director of the former hospital and now of the new facility, sees this as a twenty-year-old dream come true. "We needed a lot of persistence and determination to get this hospital", said Mrs. Delisle. "We had to convince everyone we could take charge of things, and make our own decisions in an important field like health care."

The hospital administration deals directly with the Minister of Health and Social Services, rather than going through a regional health and social services centre (RHSSC), as is the case elsewhere in Québec. The precedent-setting agreement was sanctioned by a special Act of the National Assembly, and

overrides the Act respecting health services and social services.

The Band Council administers its own social services budget since 1983. Donald Horne heads up a team of six social workers and two psychologists. "Most of our clients are adolescents or elderly persons", says Mr. Horne. "Most of our work with adolescents has to do with family or school problems."

"Although the social services available at Kahnawake are comparable to those elsewhere in



The Band Council has temporary offices in the community hall. Its headquarters were completely destroyed in last December's fire.

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Québec, there is a different approach to problems", explains Donald Horne. "We take Mohawk traditions into account, the cultural reality that surrounds us."

Economic development: an uphill struggle

For five years, Michael Rice has headed the Kahnawake economic development committee. His mandate consists in creating a better economic climate in a primarily residential setting.

Roughly fifty small businesses employ about 125 full-time workers. These include service stations, supermarkets, arts and crafts shops, convenience stores, restaurants, furniture stores, hardware stores, video clubs, etc. Three golf clubs provide seasonal work for a few people.

Nonetheless, most of the jobs are concentrated in two major sectors: public services (Band Council, schools, hospital, police station, etc.) and construction. Some 200 to 300 construction workers, most of them specialized in steel structure scaffolding, find seasonal work



One of the busiest parts of the village.

in New York State. In winter, the unemployment rate may reach 40%.

Michael Rice feels the main obstacle to the community's economic development is a massive outflow of capital. "Of the \$25 million earned by residents of Kahnawake, over \$15 million is spent in Châteauguay", he says. "A business or small industry has a difficult time obtaining financing, since there are no financial institutions on site. We want to change the situation by setting up a credit union. We should have some concrete results before the end of the year."

A culture to be preserved

The word "culture" comes up frequently in conversation in Kahnawake. A cultural renewal has taken place over the past decade, which is reflected by, among other things, the new Kanien' Kehaka Raotitiohkwa Cultural Centre.

Over the past eight years, the centre has used various means in its efforts to save the Mohawk

language. It operates the community radio station, CKRK-FM, whose objectives consist in broadcasting and promoting Mohawk language and culture. The station has five full-time employees and seventeen part-time workers. It is entirely self-financing, by means of bingos on the air and advertising.

Besides the community radio, the cultural centre includes a library and exhibition hall. "We are currently in preparation for a major exhibition which will be staged this summer", says the director, Melvin Diabo. We want to include works by ten local artists, including the sculptor Steven McComber and the painter Andrew T. Delisle Jr."

Taking control of education

Authority in the field of education is vested in a 12-member committee: the Combined Schools Committee. This committee sets major policy directions and makes major decisions concerning the two elementary schools and the high school, the Kahnawake Survival School.

Since 1984, the local Education Centre administers the education

budget. The centre's director, Mike Diabo, is very positive in describing the progress the community has made over the past ten years in coming to grips with control of education. "Ten years ago, we did not have a high school; we prepared no school programmes; there was no such thing as a Mohawk language instruction programme, and there were hardly any Mohawk teachers. The situation is completely different today. We have taken a giant step toward controlling our education system."

At the Survival School, instruction is adapted to the culture of the 150 young Mohawks in attendance. "We are developing our own teaching material", says Alex McComber, the school's principal. "Our main concern is that instruction be as practical as possible, that it be anchored in our people's reality."

One good example of this practical instruction is the class in agriculture in the 3rd year of high school. Every week, John Curotte teaches the rudiments of farming to young people — on the farm.

Last year, 23 of the school's 25 graduates registered in a college. Almost 250 Kahnawake students are attending post-secondary institutions, most of them in the Montréal region.

The peacekeepers

The peacekeepers took over the job of maintaining law and order in Kahnawake from the Amerindian police in the early 1980s. Ten patrol officers, two investigators and a police chief are on staff.

For the past few months, an 8-member committee has been in charge of the administration and control of justice. The chairman of the committee, Kenneth Kane, states that the system in effect in Kahnawake is unique in the country. "The Department of Indian Affairs

pays us the equivalent of 11 salaries of \$39 000 each. This money is used to employ 19 people, and to purchase equipment."

Mr. Kane feels there has been an enormous change in the attitude of the surrounding population toward the peacekeepers over the past five years. "People driving through our land are often astonished at being pulled over by a Kahnawake policeman, but generally their reaction is better than in 1979 or 1980."

If you have it in you to dream, you have it in you to succeed

The slogan of Olympic champion Alwyn Morris, who was born in Kahnawake, seems to have been taken to heart by the Mohawk community over the past few years. As far as Grand Chief Joseph Norton is concerned, "If you have it in you to dream, you have it in you to succeed" means: "If you want to make something of yourself, it's up to you to make it happen."



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Some 450 children attend three schools in Kahnawake.