

**Keeping a Promise: Industrial Pollution and the Anishinaabek at Paa-kaa-aa-gaa-
monⁱ (Quibel)
(without Appendices)**

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**Final Report of the Wabauskang First Nations Indigenous Knowledge and
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It is now widely known that the mercury contamination of the English-Wabigoon River system in northwest Ontario is one of the largest and most severe examples of industrial contamination in North America. The Anishinaabek People of Asupbeechooseewagong Netum Anishinabek (Grassy Narrows) and Wabaseemoong Independent Nations (Whitedog) have been suffering with the tragedy of mercury poisoning on their lands, in their waters and in their bodies for seven decadesⁱⁱ. Although this part of the story has received national news attention over the past 30 years, another group of Anishinaabek people have also been quietly suffering with the tragedy, unaware they had also been exposed to the very same contamination until the 1980s.

During the early 1960s to the late 1970s, the English-Wabigoon River system was severely contaminated with inorganic mercury, when Dryden Chemical Limited, a subsidiary of Reed Pulp and Paper dumped more than 40 000 pounds of mercury into the environment, which included the Wabigoon River at Drydenⁱⁱⁱ. From 1962-1975, Dryden Chemical was operating a mercury-cell chlor-alkali plant for the production of chlorine to use as a bleaching agent in the production of paper.

After the government of Ontario issued a control order to stop all mercury discharges into water systems, Dryden Chemical installed a designed to isolate and capture mercury, but they continued to release mercury into the air until 1975, when the company was forced to switch its technology.^{iv} The inorganic mercury dumped into the river system, was in addition to raw sewage which created a rich source of anaerobic bacteria to convert the mercury to the more toxic methyl mercury.^v Methyl mercury soon spread throughout the entire aquatic ecosystem.

The Anishinabek people, relying on the water from the river for drinking and the fish for food were not told about the mercury for several years, and they continued to drink the contaminated water and eat the contaminated fish for over a decade. Fish from the river system were a staple in the diet of community members. Commercial fishing and guiding sport fishers provided the communities with its main source of jobs. Fishing represented a substantial component of the local economy, and so when people could no longer eat the fish, they lost their sustenance, their economic and food security, and their way of life became threatened.

Fish in the English-Wabigoon River system were severely contaminated by methyl mercury with mean mercury concentrations in 1975 ranging from 0.47 – 5.98 ppm^{vi}. Health Canada's guideline for the safe consumption of fish for frequent fish eaters is 0.2 ppm. Studies completed by Wabauskang First Nation in 2002 indicate that there are still elevated levels of mercury in pike and walleye in addition to elevated levels of mercury in otters.^{vii}

Asupbeechooseewagong Netum Anishinabek (Grassy Narrows) and Wabaseemoong Independent Nations (Whitedog) eventually received compensation in the 1980s for the contamination, but their Elders and Anishinaabek Knowledge Holders have continued to report that the mercury contamination is still in the river system and that it is still having

significant negative impacts on the fish, aquatic animals, water and wildlife in addition to contributing to illness in the community. This perspective is in sharp contrast to what the people were told at the time, scientists and government officials assured them that the mercury would be completely out of the system in 30 years.

Anishinaabek people living at Paa-kaa-aa-gaa-mon or Quibel, just north of Vermillion Bay, Ontario were the first hit with the contamination. Now part of Wabauskang First Nation^{viii}, these families that experienced the devastating effects of industrial contamination but were never compensated. In fact, community members did not even know that they had been exposed to large amounts of mercury until the late 1980s. Community Elders remember many people dying untimely and unexplained deaths before the mercury spill was acknowledged. These people were drinking river water and eating fish throughout the 1970s, unaware of the contamination. Again, the impacts of contamination were severe and devastating for the families involved.

This was not the first time the people living at Quibel had suffered the impacts of industrial pollution. In the mid 1940s, eleven babies born in the small community suddenly died. Those who were being bottled fed with milk made from the river water died first, and several others, including those babies that were being breastfed were permanently damaged from the contamination^{ix}. Betty Riffel was a child at the time, living with her family along the river at Quibel, and she remembers this horrific and traumatic experience very well. Her younger brother Donny, was one of the babies that died. Sick from birth, he lived only nine months, and suffered a terrible death, as did all the other babies at the time, having repeated violent seizures until they died. At the time, medical officials told her parents that he had “an incurable disease”. This was something no one in the community had ever experienced before. Betty believes the death of these babies and the deaths and disabilities of other community members are consistent with severe mercury poisoning, although at the time, the kraft pulp mill in Dryden was polluting the Wabigoon River with large quantities of a variety of toxic chemicals in their effluent^x. Neither industry, nor the federal or the provincial government has attempted to make amends for this blatant injustice. After her baby brother died, Betty went for a long walk in the bush. During the walk, she made a promise to herself and to him to do something about this horrible injustice. Her work on this project is part of that promise.

The Petiquan family, members of the Kingfisher Clan of the Anishinaabek nation has always lived in the English-Wabigoon River system. Wabauskang represented a main gathering place for many of the families that later formed Grassy Narrows and Wabauskang First Nations. In 1873, these families were represented by Ogimaa^{xi} Sah-Katch-eway and they were signatories to Treaty 3. In 1882 they were given two reserve sights, one near the current reserve at Grassy Narrows and they other at Wabauskang. Anishinaabek people would spend the winter on family hunting and trapping grounds within the English-Wabigoon River system, gathering for their summers at Wabauskang to trade, fish, conduct ceremonies and engage in the governance of the nation.

This changed dramatically in 1919 when a terrible epidemic of small pox and tuberculosis hit the small community that killed a great many people^{xii}. To escape the

epidemic, the Chief at the time, Charles Perrault, decided that the families should move away from Wabauskang. Some families chose to relocate to their traplines and hunting grounds to escape the disease, others moved to the old Grassy Narrows Reserve, Lac Seule, Eagle Lake and Quibel^{xiii}. One year later, pulp and paper operations began in Dryden, ON and throughout the next century the English-Wabigoon river would be contaminated with a variety of chemicals, including organochlorines, dioxins and furans, and mercury, from the plant.

Bertha Petiquan, an Elder from Wabauskang, and the only Elder living from Quibel recalls what life was like in those times, before the contamination^{xiv}:

“I was born in Quibel someplace. I grew up around Quibel. [...] We were living in the bush all the time. We didn't stay in the town. My mother's name was Sarah. My father's name was Herman. My mother went with him all over. She died 2 days after she had me. I don't know what happened. My uncle and his wife looked after me. I was raised trapping and hunting, fishing. I went to school for 2 years at McIntosh. I went to school too late so I didn't know anything. We were staying in the bush all the time and nobody knew us.

I remember living in the bush. My auntie makes some wigwams. They were nice. She made big ones, fire in the middle, smoke goes up. They were nice. It is hard to do. I know how to do it. They were made out of birch bark. We had to clean those birch barks, cut the big long ones and scrub them. We lived in those all year around. They were warm. We just put a fence kind of in front of the door. We never got cold.

My auntie did the skinning. She was really strong that women. She had big hands. We would move around. My uncle would make a big high toboggan to move..... to make the sliding easy. We had dogs to pull it. They were strong. I remember. They go fast. We had 4 dogs. We had a female dog that ran loose at the front and then they went fast.

We didn't move the wigwam, we would come back to it again. My uncle got lots of children – 7. We would all sleep in the wigwam. We used spruce bows to make our beds. [...] In the wigwam we didn't have to use anything because the fire inside lights.

We always asked my uncle to make us kids toboggans to play with. When we were staying in the bush there was a big hill to go down. We also made our own dolls. We made dogs too. We made all kinds of stuff to play with. Then we always wanted to go to the store to buy something. We made the dolls out of old rags. We made little people and dollies out of leaves. The boys would make boats. I would fix the boats for the boys. Now you have to go to the store spend money. [...]

We always ate the rabbits, rabbits, rabbits. There wasn't that many beaver long time ago. We just killed moose once – not too many moose a long time ago. Sometime we eat bear meat. One time my uncle found a bear under the snow. We dried meat. We always ate porcupine too. Sometimes they went all day

setting snares. Sometimes they would send us to go to get the rabbits. My hands just about froze.

We wore moccasins. My auntie always made them. They were nice and soft. They put it in the fire to make the hide. You have to take the hair first, then you have to soak it again. You have to use brain. You have to clean it...wash it again. After that it dries, and hang it for 2 days. That is how it is cooked. It is brown. You have to cook the brain. Just deer hide, not moose hide. We just cooked the brain with water.”

After spending some time back at Wabauskang, Bertha married John Petiquan and moved back to Quibel in 1937 to start a family. Bertha and John expected Quibel to be a good place to raise their children as the land and the river had always provided them with everything they need – animals to hunt and trap, fish to net, rice beds to collect manoomin (wild rice) and water to drink from the river. They had no reason to believe otherwise, but they began to notice that something was terribly wrong over the next decade.

At the time, Paa-kaa-aa-gaa-mon or Quibel was a small community located along the tracks of the CNR and there were both Anishinaabek and non-Natives living there. There were houses, tents, a few stores and a nursing station there. People worked on the tracks, but there was also work in the bush cutting wood and guiding. People continued to travel to hunting and trapping grounds in other parts of the English-Wabigoon river system and they set nets along the Wabigoon river to catch fish, drank the water from the river and gathered plants, rice and wild berries from the surrounding areas. Their diet consisted of northern pike, whitefish, walleye, deer, moose, ducks, beavers and rabbits.

People began to get sick in the mid-1940s, but it was the children and babies who bore the brunt of the sickness. Between 1947 and 1949, 10 babies died, all in their first year of life, and all had violent seizures, and what doctors and nurses at the time called “an incurable disease”^{xv}. Most of the babies that died were bottle fed with carnation milk mixed directly with water from the river. Most of the babies that survived were breastfed, but they also suffered and continue to suffer life-long neurological damage. Elders and community members believe that this is a result of the contamination of the Wabigoon River. They believe the pulp and paper industry in Dryden poisoned the water.

From a scientific perspective, the description of the symptoms sound indeed like methylmercury poisoning. All of which were used in kraft pulp mills in the 1940s. Kraft pulp and paper mills were notorious for using Hg compounds (mostly HgCl₂) as fungicides and bactericides to keep pulp and paper from rotting^{xvi}. This could have easily been spilled into the river system and converted to methylmercury prior to the spill in the 1960s.

Adults also experienced and continue to experience symptoms that include tingling in the extremities, falling down for no reason, seizures, numbness, shaking and tremors. Their symptoms are getting worse as they age^{xvii}. There were also a high number of suicides in

the 1960s which people also believe are linked to mercury poisoning. Many of the last remaining Anishinaabek people who lived at Quibel (there are 9, plus 2 that are now members of Grassy Narrows) have all had their symptoms linked to mercury poisoning by medical doctors^{xviii}. Even the dogs and cats were sick, having seizures from eating the leftover fish. There is also a high incidence of cancer in the people who were living at Quibel, and some of the remaining people link these cancers to exposure to dioxin and furans in the pulp mill effluent.

Several people interviewed recall the water smelling foul at certain times of the year. They recall seeing a tremendous amount of foam, mostly dark brown and sometimes green on top of the water – more foam than they had ever seen anywhere^{xix}. Some of the people remember an incident that involved large amounts of black tar in the river that they could not wash out of their hair after swimming.

People began to move away from Quibel in the mid 1950s, moving to other locations in the English-Wabigoon River system. In the early 1970s, the reserve was re-established at Wabauskang, and the people of Quibel became band members there. They were never included in the negotiations or the settlement Grassy Narrows and Whitedog reached with the Canadian government, the province of Ontario and the two pulp and paper companies, and they did not learn they had been contaminated until the early 1980s.

The Path Ahead

Those community members interviewed expressed a desire to pursue compensation from appropriate governments and industry. As Pat Petiquan explained to me, the people of Grassy and Whitedog were compensated and so were the white people that lived at Quibel. The only people that have not been compensated were the Anishinaabek people living at Quibel. This injustice only adds to the pain the people feel regarding the events of the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. They also expressed a desire to place a memorial at Quibel to honor those that lost their lives to industrial pollution.

Beyond this, the people that lived at Quibel would like to continue to study the issue of contamination in their territory. We have plans to take sediment core samples at Quibel this summer with a scientist, and there are documents that could be helpful to pinpointing what happened at Quibel in the 1940s in the archives in Toronto (access is restricted and must be obtained through the Freedom of Information Act), Thunder Bay and Kenora.

Notes

ⁱ This is the Anishnabek name for Quibel, and it means at the bend in the river.

ⁱⁱ The initial poisoning occurred between 1962 and 1975, scientific studies completed by Grassy Narrows and Wabauskang First Nations have documented continuing elevated mercury levels in sediments, crayfish, fish and other top predators. See

ⁱⁱⁱ Anastasia M. Shkilnyk, *A Poison Stronger than Love: The Destruction of an Ojibwa Community*, Yale University Press, New Haven Connecticut, 1985, 179-191.

^{iv} *A Poison Stronger than Love*; George Hutchison and Dick Wallace, *Grassy Narrows*, Van Nostrand Reinhold, Toronto, 1977.

^v *A Poison Stronger than Love*, 184. A reference to the raw sewage is made in Richard B. Philip, *Environmental Hazards and Human Health*, CRC Publishing, 1995, 138.

^{vi} From *A Poison Stronger Than Love*, 189, Pike 2.31-5.18 ppm, walleye 1.58-5.98 ppm and whitefish 0.47-1.39 ppm.

^{vii} Asubpeecheoseewagong Netum Anishinabek (Grassy Narrows) and Wabauskang First Nation, Final Report of the Contaminants Project (Heavy Metals), 2005;

Asubpeecheoseewagong Netum Anishinabek (Grassy Narrows) and Wabauskang First Nation, Final Report of the Contaminants Project (Organochlorines).

^{viii} The community of Wabauskang First Nation is a small Anishinaabek community located in north west Ontario, about 100 km north of Vermillion Bay.

^{ix} The babies that died in their first year of life included -Jim Petiquan's daughter #1, Jim Petiquan's daughter #2, Jim Petiquan's daughter #3, Jim Petiquan's daughter #4, Donny Petiquan, Roy Fobister (breastfed), Robert Fobister (breastfed), Harriet Petiquan's daughter #1, Harriet Petiquan daughter #2, and Anne-Marie Perault's son.

^xThe Dryden Paper Company did not build a recovery plant until 1945 – see <http://www.cityofdryden.on.ca/history.shtml>. The invention of the recovery boiler in the 1930s is often hailed as a milestone in the advancement of the kraft process because it allowed for the recovery and reuse of inorganic pulping chemicals. Before recovery plants, pulp mills discharged highly toxic black liquor (a dark brown cola like colour) directly into rivers. Dryden Chemical (parent company is Reed Pulp and Paper) installed the mercury-cell process in 1962-1975 – this produced the mercury that was dumped into the Wabigoon River. See www.ec.gc.ca/ceparegistry/documents/pubs/eps-1-ga-2/table.cfm and George Hutchison and Dick Wallace, *Grassy Narrows*, Van Nostrand Reinhold Ltd., Toronto, ON, 1977, 32.

^{xi} Ogimaa is the Anishinaabek word for Chief or leader.

^{xii} Interview with Bertha Petiquan September 6, 2007; Andrew Chapeski, Ian Davidson-Hunt and Roger Fobister, Paper Presented at the International Association for the Study of the Commons, *Passing On Ojibwa Lifeways in a Contemporary Environment*, available online at <http://www.indiana.edu/~iascp/Final/chapeski.pdf>.

^{xiii} Interview with Bertha Petiquan September 6, 2007; *Passing On Ojibwa Lifeways in a Contemporary Environment*.

^{xiv} Bertha Petiquan died during the writing of this report in October 2007.

^{xv} These babies were Jim Petiquan's daughter #1, Jim Petiquan daughter #2, Jim Petiquan daughter #3, Jim Petiquan daughter #4, Donny Petiquan, Roy Fobister, Robert

Fobister, Harriet Petiquan daughter #1, Harriet Petiquan daughter #2 and Anne-Marie Perault's son.

^{xvi} Personal Communication (email) with Dr. Holger Hintelmann, Associate Professor and NSERC Industrial Research Chair, Department of Chemistry and Environmental and Resource Studies, Trent University, October 26, 2007.

^{xvii} See transcripts of interviews.

^{xviii} The remaining people of Quibel include Bertha Petiquan, Betty Riffel, Jane Williams, Pat Petiquan, Andrew Petiquan, Barney Petiquan, Dave Petiquan, John Petiquan, Margaret Wolf, and Bill Petiquan.. They have never been compensated. Andrew Fobister, Evelyn Pahpasay are now members of Grassy Narrows and were compensated when Grassy Narrows received its settlement.

^{xix} See *Environmental Hazards and Human Health*, 138.