

## **Stories from the North; Lessons for the South**

*A speech on the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Citizens for Public Justice and the Public Justice Resource Centre, Vancouver, Wednesday, May 19, 2004*

By René Fumoleau, priest and author

In 1953 I crossed the Atlantic Ocean by ship from France to Quebec City. The train took me to Edmonton and to Waterways-Fort McMurray. Then it was by boat northward to Lake Athabasca, down the Slave River across Great Slave Lake, and down Dehcho (Mackenzie River).

When I landed at Radeli Ko (Fort Good Hope) near the Arctic Circle, I didn't know anything of the K'ashotine Denes, their history, their values and their 100,000 square km territory. Adele volunteered as my history and social studies professor:

"Me and my husband, we used to trap all winter long. Sometimes way up the Mountain River, close to the Yukon border. At times, to the south, close to Nohfee Ke Gode (Loche Lake). Some winters, we lived near K'ahmitue (Colville Lake) nearly two hundred kilometers to the north-east. Good fishing there, and usually lots of caribou, good fur country, too, around Lac des Bois. Or we traveled North four or five days by dog team, to Tuk a Tue (Loon Lake), Roe Tue (Rorey Lake), and Fichelejee Tue (Canoe Lake). We had good dog teams those days and good legs and good snowshoes. My husband, he was lucky at moose hunting, probably because he was smart and not lazy. Me, too, I was good at snaring rabbits, shooting ptarmigan and partridge, setting and visiting fishnets.

"When the trapping season was over, we returned to the village for a while. Right after Easter, we moved to Tuyahta, you know, way up the Ts'ude nihne (Ramparts River) the country with thousands of small lakes. Hard travelling because the snow was melting, but daylight all night, lots of ducks, geese, beaver and muskrat. Ha! Spring time! The whole world and us, too, we were frenzied with light and warmth.

"Right after the ice broke up, we paddled back to the village. Then, we camped up Dehcho (Mackenzie River), below the big rapid, and the whole summer, we dried fish for the winter. In a good summer, we made eighty bales of dry fish, you know, with one hundred and twenty fish in a bale. It was something to clean and open up all those fish, to hang them in the sun, and later in the smoking tent. Came fall, off we were to the trappings grounds. We were young and smart in those days, and me and my husband, we raised five children."

I couldn't keep my feelings to myself: "You and your husband, you must have worked so hard all your life!"

Adele smiled, and shook her head, possibly wondering if I would ever understand, "No! I told you we never worked, we lived in the bush all the time."

In 1970 I settled for a few months in T'e'ehda, a small Dene community without phone and electricity, and without a permanent road to Yellowknife, about 25 km away.

I was fascinated by the games Dene children invented according to the seasons. It was perfectly safe for them to play on the "road" between the houses. Joe owned the only truck in the village, and snowmobiles had not arrived yet. In winter, any stretch of road turned into an arena. Children handmade their hockey sticks. Blocks of firewood became goal posts. Players wore moccasins and parkas, and I couldn't figure out who was on what team and which official rules applied or did not apply. One November afternoon, I decided to watch attentively. The Eagles and the Ravens started with five players each. The score climbed, 1-1. Then, the Ravens scored twice in a row, so they gave a player to the Eagles to even the chances. Later on, the Eagles led by two goals, and in turn, they gave one player to the Ravens. Then I understood why the scores were always so close: 2-1, 4-3, 5-4, 3-2, and no team was ever really beaten.

I moved to Lutsel K'e nine years ago. Antoine, now 50 years old, told me what happened to him when he was 12 or 13 years old and lived in the Barren Land with his parents and his eight brothers and sisters:

"My dad had set a long trap-line to catch white foxes. Me, I was learning with a few traps not so far from our tent. One December morning, when the sun never rises even at noon, I started with my four dogs. I had already visited a few traps when wind, snow and blizzard enfolded us. Stretching my arm I couldn't see my hand. I turned my toboggan upside down, and I crawled underneath. The dogs too, they knew their trade: they curled themselves along the toboggan on the protected side. The evening, the whole night!

"Finally the storm tired itself out and a pale daylight appeared. The dogs shook themselves free of snow. The clouds reached the ground. The frozen waves of the snowdrifts looked totally unfamiliar. Not one usual landmark! 'Where is the north? South? Where is our camp?' My dogs had often shown better flair than me. I harnessed them. I faced the team in one direction, in another one, but they didn't move. Nowhere to go.

"Then I heard some noise and I turned my head. Twenty meters behind us a white wolf walked silently, a barren-land wolf, two metres long. The wolf walked by us and veered a bit to the left. I don't know why but the dogs heeled. I jumped into the toboggan and we followed the wolf, one hour, two hours? I don't know, I don't know. At one point, the wolf turned his head and looked at me and the dogs. Then he galloped away towards the left. I looked ahead, I looked around to the right, to the left: 'Oh, I know where we are. Our tent is behind that hill, ten minutes away, straight ahead'."

I share those stories to show how the Denes lived and felt for 10,000 years when they used to say, "This land doesn't belong to us. We belong to the land."

In the late 1960s, the Dene world came under attack from all sides, especially from the "Territorial Government" which was established in Yellowknife in 1967. "Whatever the policy of the territorial government is called, assimilation, colonization or genocide, its goal has been to destroy us as Denes." To insure their survival, the Denes, in October 1969, established the Indian Brotherhood of the NWT.

In August 1970, the Federal Government issued its *Northern Pipeline Guidelines* on how to move natural gas from the Mackenzie River Delta and the Beaufort Sea to the U.S.A.: the largest ever project of private enterprise in the history of Canada.

The President of Imperial Oil declared: "Our company should move on to our northern properties as an army of occupation." From my own experience in May 1940, when the German army invaded France, I knew what an army of occupation meant. In October 19, 1971, I happened to be in Inuvik when Robin Abercrombie made a presentation at the Research Center. He was the president of Alberta Gas Trunk, one of the five companies forming the consortium called "Gas Arctic." He overwhelmed me with statistics about "the" pipeline. Thousands and millions of tons of steel, of cubic yards of gravel, of manpower hours, billions of dollars....

After his presentation he answered a few questions. The last question was:

"Mr. Abercrombie, about your pipeline: The Aboriginal nations around here say that the land along the Mackenzie Valley is their land and that they should be consulted. Also people who are concerned about the environment say that there haven't been enough studies done, and that such a pipeline could severely disturb the environment and create real problems for the future. What can you tell those people?"

Mr. Abercrombie's answer: "Us, we let those people talk. We have our timetable. We start building in September next year."

Many "white" residents of the NWT were also concerned that the exploitation of northern natural gas, and a pipeline to carry it to U.S. markets, might not be in the best interest of Canada and Canadians. In Yellowknife, they organized "Alternatives North." In September 1971, they invited John Olthuis of the Committee for Justice and Liberty (CJL, now Citizens for Public Justice or CPJ) to Denendeh. We appreciated our first contact with CJL. Many Denes and white people had fears, dreams, desires and aspirations.

True to its motto: "Our research stands up. Our advocacy has bite," CJL provided us with accurate information on the business world and political situations and also suggested strategies to make our voices heard and our action effective. A concert of voices from across Canada forced the federal government to establish the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry in 1974. In 1975, John Olthuis made a presentation, *Economic growth: Blight or Blessing*, to the Institute for Christian Studies. In September 1975 the Canadian Conference of Catholic

Bishops issued the document: *Northern Development At What Cost?* The Presbyterian, Lutheran, United, Roman Catholic and Anglican Churches established the reflection and action organization "Project North", in which the Quakers and the Mennonite Central Committee were also partners.

Until then I had lived only with Catholics, and, as a priest in a small community, I could make all my decisions by myself. Now I was sitting and learning from members of all different churches. Also, for the first time, I had the opportunity to listen to, learn from, and make decisions with women.

In November 1976, CJL published 50,000 copies of a popularized version of the *Evidence presented by Project North to the National Energy Board*. In April 1977, Gerald Vandezande published *Canada at the Crossroads*. In 1977, Hugh and Karmel McCullum and John Olthuis published the book: *Moratorium: Justice, Energy, The North and Native People*. I also remember well my first long interview with Gerald Vandezande which was published in CPJ's Spring 1977 newsletter.

The Denes, the churches and CJL created a network of supporters in 75 Canadian cities. Most of us, after first feeling sorry for the Denes, realized their situations was the result of unjust structures which also affected us negatively. We were not only supporting the Denes but also helping ourselves. In many offices and houses hung a poster with these words from Lila Watson, an Australian Aboriginal woman: "If you have come to help us, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with ours, then let's work together."

Denes and Whites, we discovered that we can enrich each other with different gifts and strengths.

**Some people favor**

lines  
action  
saving  
climbing  
competition  
innovation  
obedience

**Some people favor**

circles  
patience  
sharing  
dancing  
co-operation  
tradition  
participation

Also, we can help each other to deal with our different brokenness, weaknesses and limitations. In 1976, in Edmonton, three hundred friends of the Denes gathered for a weekend of reflection in the First Presbyterian Church. During a small workshop on Saturday, a woman addressed a Dene man named Frank:

**You talked about your Dene Nation. How many Denes are you?**

I don't know.

**Are you a few hundreds? Many thousands?**

I don't know.

**Do you have census, statistics?**

I don't think so...

**You have a vast homeland, how many of you live there?**

Madam, I know that I am a Dene, but I don't know how many people are conscious of being who they are.

On Sunday morning one woman asked George Barnaby: "We listened to you and to how you plan to de-colonize yourselves. We feel good about your courage and your commitment. For us in the south, is there anything we can do to help you?"

"Oh yes, madam, if you really want to help us, try to de-colonize yourselves also."

*Northern Frontier, Northern Homeland: the Report of the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry*, was released in September 1977. Judge Berger foresaw that "Oil and gas development in the Mackenzie Delta-Beaufort Sea region is inevitable," but recommended that "a Mackenzie Valley pipeline should be post-poned for 10 years."

Twenty-seven years after the Berger Inquiry, the Mackenzie Valley pipeline is again front news in Denendeh. A few Dene communities have formed an Aboriginal Pipeline Working Group to ensure they can profit from the construction and operation of the future pipeline.

We may still consider what a Fort McPherson man told the Berger Inquiry:

"I am an old man. I never went to school and I never traveled very far from my village, but I heard that in the world, millions of people have no food and no clean water, millions of people are starving to death. If the pipeline could help those people I would tell you: 'Go ahead and build it right away, even if it will bother us a bit around here.' Because we have to help those poor and starving people. But if the pipeline is going to make richer some people who are already very rich, then it will make all the poor people of the world poorer. Then it's no good."

We still need CPJ.

Thank you.

## B E N E F I T S

"I gave you detailed information on the Mackenzie Valley pipeline and I will conclude my presentation. If my company builds the pipeline it will bring enormous benefits to all the people of the valley. Do you have any questions?"

"Sir, will the pipeline eliminate the need for food banks, produce affordable housing for all, reduce the cost of living everywhere, bring all the nurses and doctors we need?"

"Well, . . . another question?"

"Sir, will the pipeline put a stop to the drug traffic, eliminate alcohol-related problems, reduce child poverty and child abuse, lower the crime rate and the suicide rate, provide a cure for the victims of addictions?"

"Well, . . . another question?"

"Sir, will the pipeline remove social tensions, prevent school dropouts, reduce family breakdowns, eliminate the need for jails, rid people of racist feelings?"

"Well, . . . another question?"

"Sir, will the pipeline help reduce the atmospheric pollution, provide better water in every community, clean up all the contaminants left everywhere?"

"Well, . . . really, it's not up to my company to address those concerns."

"So what benefits are you talking about?"

*René Fumoleau*

## René Fumoleau

René Fumoleau, O.M.I., was born in France in 1926. He was ordained a priest in 1952 and came to the Northwest Territories in 1953. He worked with the Dene in Fort Good Hope from 1953 to 1959, in Fort Franklin from 1960 to 1968 and then returned to Fort Good Hope between 1968-1969.

In 1971, he began historical research on Treaties 8 and 11 which resulted in the publication of "As Long As This Land Shall Last: A History of Treaty 8 and Treaty 11, 1870-1939". From 1970 until 1994 he lived in Yellowknife and then moved to the community of Lutsel K'e.



During his time in the North he was an avid photographer and many of his photographs have been displayed, sold and published. He has also published several monographs, including "As Long as This Land Shall Last." In addition, he has produced and directed several films including "I Was Born Here" and "Dene Nation." He is now active in the area of storytelling, speaking at numerous national conferences.



### **Public Justice Resource Centre**

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PJRC, founded in 1963, is a research and education organization that responds to God's call for love, justice, and stewardship in the understanding and discussion of core values and faith perspectives in Canadian public policy debates. It works closely with its sister organization, Citizens for Public Justice.



### **CITIZENS for PUBLIC JUSTICE**

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CPJ is a national, non-partisan organization that promotes justice in Canadian public affairs. CPJ responds to God's call for love, justice, and stewardship through research, education and advocacy. CPJ works closely with its sister organization, the Public Justice Resource Centre.

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