

Lawlessness called the issue on Kanesatake reserve

COVER STORY

When gangs ride herd

Lawlessness the issue in Oka of today

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THE rest of the country knows it as Kanesatake, but more and more disgruntled Mohawks refer to their community as "Hoie-in-the-Wall" — a reference to a lawless refuge where violent criminals congregated in the Old West.

"The issue here is not natives against whites or natives against natives," says Debbie Etienne, a young woman who played an active role during the Oka golf-course standoff of 1990. "The issue is lawlessness."

"You can't even drive on the roads at night. [Gang members] drive in the middle of the road and won't move. People don't even go out at night any more."

Composed of both Mohawks and non-natives, a gang terrorizing the Kanesatake area has seized upon a situation wide open to exploitation — the lack of an effective police presence.

And Kanesatake has no one it can really look to for help in ousting the criminal element, Ms. Etienne said.

The only police force with jurisdiction to act is the provincial force, the *Sûreté du Québec*, and it is highly mistrusted by the Mohawks. For their part, police officers are afraid of stumbling into ambushes on the dark back roads of the Mohawk section, so they routinely refuse to enter.

Ms. Etienne said *Sûreté* officers also admit privately that some of their colleagues are on the take. It is open knowledge in the community that the police turn a blind eye as the gang smuggles contraband in and out, she said. She also alleged that the gang has allies on the band council.

The presence of the gang is the most dramatic aspect in a legacy of misery since the events of 1990. Four years later:

- Land-claim negotiations are at a standstill;
- Vandalism and harassment are endemic — the worst instance being the gang;
- There has been a general social breakdown in which drugs, alcohol and despair have taken a particularly firm grip on youth;

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• Bitter factionalism divides residents. Ignited by a decision by Oka town council to expand the municipal golf course onto land claimed by the Mohawks, the confrontation has driven a wedge between various factions of the community.

Natives and non-natives are split into a number of isolated groups based on race, political affiliation or spiritual beliefs. Fear and mistrust have many faces these days, and a handful of Oka residents spoke in interviews of how developments have affected their own particular niche.

Drugs and gun dealing are commonplace. Ms. Etienne said. "They are even using kids now to sell drugs in schools. Some of them are being threatened if they don't co-operate. We have got child pornography going on that kids are forced into."

"There is so much going on that it is terrible. It is a real shame that these people are undermining everything the Mohawk people stand for."

The gang systematically takes over homes bought by the federal government and trashes them. "They shoot them up and rip out cupboards and swimming pools to sell them," Ms. Etienne said. "Then they move on to the next one."

Many of the wealthier homes in the area appear to be next on the government's list of acquisitions, she said. Gang members have taken to brazenly painting their names on the doors of these homes to stake their claims.

"It is as if there are a bunch of wolves outside your door," she said. "It's barbaric."

Ms. Etienne belongs to a faction in the Mohawk community that believes staunchly in Longhouse traditions such as sweat-lodge ceremonies and the use of traditional medicine.

According to Mohawk tradition, she said, children are the responsibility of the community. "We have promised them that we will stand up for them." While she considers a considerable feat of retaliation, she said, more natives are likely to begin speaking out.

What brought matters to a head was the death of two teenagers several weeks ago in a car accident at Kanesatake. Suspicion is widespread that they were run off by a drunken youth driving a back-roads drug race.

Ms. Etienne predicted that a scattered force of Mohawks from other Canadian reserves and New York State will ultimately descend on the area to quell the lawlessness.

"I think we are going to have to call on our own to clean up our own," she said. "I think it's going to blow up."

It was one thing to face armed and angry soldiers over a blockade four years ago, but Linda Simon has discovered something far more terrifying than guns or tanks.

"My greatest fear is that my children will grow up hating me because I'm not a native," said Ms. Simon, a white who is director of education for the Kanesatake Mohawk band and the wife of a former band chief.

Oka is no longer the placid spot Ms. Simon found 23 years ago when she married her Mohawk husband and had four children. In those days, the aboriginal community appeared resigned to a peaceful co-existence with the descendants of the whites who appropriated their land centuries ago. Ms. Simon gradually turned into a Mohawk in every way but one — her blood.

"It was a different community then," she said. "I wasn't aware of the heartbeat. The feelings were there, but very much below the surface. Since 1990, the ghosts of the past have become more apparent. It



The Chevalier family in their home near the Mohawk common land which was at the centre of the 78-day Oka standoff. Left to right, Michel, Michel Sr., and Jessa. The dog is Pitay.

is very difficult I am being screamed at because I am white. Even the children in the schoolyards say things like: 'Your mother is French. Your mother is white. You're not Indian.'

She said land-claims negotiations with Ottawa lie at the heart of much of the tension. But despite talks grinding to a halt in 1992, the government has quietly continued to buy up non-native properties. It is a strategy that makes most Mohawks cynical. They see the government as kowtowing to whites who want to grab their money and run while they can.

Meanwhile, tactical disagreements within the elected Kanesatake band council have virtually paralyzed the political process. The education centre headed by Ms. Simon provides an interesting illustration.

The centre is located in a home recently purchased by the government from a non-native family. The band council opposed its being occupied, insisting that the natives should hold out for outright ownership of any land within the area they claim.

Anxious to occupy the house immediately, the centre's employees simply ignored the council and moved in. It has become a familiar pattern. The government barely acquires a property before somebody moves in.

"It is obvious that from time immemorial, the land has belonged to the Indians," Ms. Simon said. "They wanted it to be put on the record. They came creeping down the driveway so carefully. They said: 'We never know when we are going to be trapped.' They said a lot of the police are so angry they can't come near, but certain ones know they can con-vert themselves."

While most non-native properties in the area are modest, the Chevalier property totals about 80 hectares of rolling farmland and pine stands located close to the golf course. Under happier circumstances, the land would hold the promise of wealth

instead, it has become a no man's land.

The bulk of the Chevalier land was acquired shortly after the Second World War, but some portions date to the turn of the century. Like other non-natives, the family put the blame for their current plight on a government that permitted — and often encouraged — them to acquire land that belonged to others.

"The Mohawks say they have owned it since time immemorial, and I absolutely understand their feelings," Mrs. Chevalier said. "What the white people have done since arriving is terrible."

But if the Chevaliers must go, they want a fair price. More than 50 families have sold their homes already, but the Chevaliers are unhappy with the sole offer they received from the government.

In the meantime, everyday life is a test. Shots ring out regularly, and residents complain of feeling harassed

another incident like Oka. But I frankly think it might be better to have another one blow up and force some kind of resolution."

As part of the ever-worsening waiting game, the Chevaliers realize their belongings could disappear at any time. They also fear that insurance will become prohibitively expensive.

The family is unsure even whether to lock their gate when they leave, since that would advertise their absence. Mrs. Chevalier said there is also a sad and pointless feeling to planting trees or flowers — let alone spending money on upkeep — since the family is so unlikely to have a future in Oka.

"They are lined up waiting for our homes," said Mrs. Chevalier, speaking in her Toronto apartment where she spends the winter. "We are in an untenable position. I have to go — and it's very painful. My roots are there."

Other non-natives are unwilling to

tend to avert their eyes. Old acquaintances are nervous about even acknowledging one another lest they be rebuffed.

"Now, we meet even our own families and it is cold," Mrs. Conway said. "We don't feel the same way about each other. Everything is really out of control."

"We've used to living all mixed and nobody had any hard feelings for anybody. Nobody was causing any trouble. Now I wonder if it is ever going to be over."

Some of the non-natives who haven't sold out or left the community are paying the price for being too vociferous during the blockade, she said.

"They know the Indians hate them," Mrs. Conway said. "If you get along with them they don't bother you. But if they know you are against them, they'll break into your house and smash it up."

Mrs. Conway, a slight Mohawk woman in her early 50s, voted for current Chief Jerry Pelter in the last band election. She now leans toward electing a new chief who is less prone to cronyism and more likely to negotiate than confront.

"There is supposed to be a meeting every month so everybody knows what is happening," Mrs. Conway said. "But there haven't been any since January. Everything is happening so fast, you don't know what is happening. There are no answers to anything."

The Pelier administration is accused by members of most factions of missing band funds intended for the entire community. People are made more bitter when they see councilors and their friends with fancy cars while they have trouble getting band money for home improvements.

Like many of the older residents, Mrs. Conway is most disturbed about what the children of the community witnessed during and after the standoff.

"All the young children — even the two- and three-year-olds — have been brainwashed about what happened in 1990," she said. "They are brainwashed that we hate the white people, we hate the police and we hate this and that. I'm pretty sure

those children are going to grow up bating. They are going to say we can only be friends with our own kind."

As writer approaches, jobs are almost non-existent for those youths. Even the sale of cut-rate cigarettes — the only reasonably reliable source of income — has been hurt by a drop in tobacco taxes.

The picture gets worse. The school dropout rate and teen pregnancies are at an all-time high. Some of the pregnancies involve girls as young as 14. Drug abuse and alcoholism among youth are equally out of control.

Many of the youths who were in their formative years during the crisis now feel a little more comfortable with weapons. "They brought their up militant — don't be afraid to fight and all that," Mrs. Conway said. "So now they don't care. They will take a gun and shoot."

This past spring, she recalled, a group of youths broke into a nearby house and shot it to bits with a machine gun. "I've seen one house where they smashed all the windows and took the roof off," she said.

Said Mrs. Conway, maintaining the one belief that is shared throughout Kanesatake: They want to take away the Pines from us, and we've got to fight it, she said. "Can this really be true? That now we're going to lose the Pines, too?"

DISPOSSESSION is a constant theme in the history of Kanesatake. Stones are legion of religious orders or political administrators seizing land from the Mohawks through theft or stealth.

The community was further weakened by internal strife and the forced expulsion of children to residential schools. Those who returned from the schools no longer knew the feeling of being in a family. "There are families where it is obvious there is a lot of physical abuse and the parents aren't there," Ms. Simon said.

"The people have been living these things for so many centuries that the community is no longer healthy," she said. "Because of generations of oppression and abuse, people tend to react as any human would — with violence, scoffing, backbiting and hating your neighbour."

Ms. Simon said she now fears the provincial government may use a chaotic situation in Kanesatake to justify another raid. "I think the Parti Québécois has got to get itself in a position where it appears it can handle its own affairs."

However, she said it would be a mistake for the outside world to think Kanesatake is happy with its lawless environment. The dilemma is that as frightened as people are, they also know that any intrusion by the authorities could lead to a far worse explosion than occurred in 1990. The cumulative effect of years of resentment has raised tempers to a steady boil. Many people are not even aware how close their anger is to the surface, she said.

Ms. Simon cited one of her sons as an example. On the last day of the Oka standoff, the 11-year-old boy had been one of several children who mocked the police with pig noises from a bus window.

"They came to the back of the bus, grabbed him, shook him and pushed his face into the seat," Ms. Simon recalls. "It just terrified him. To this day, he won't talk about it."

Ms. Simon was herself pinned to the ground by soldiers near the blockade after she lost her temper with them for making her wait five hours to deliver a collection of baby clothes to the Mohawks behind the blockade.

"In a confrontation, I think the anger would come back," she said. "A lot of us have things we haven't handled. People feel the police should be in here, but their fear is that they won't react logically."