

MONTREAL

The Gazette

SINCE 1778

Outside metro area \$1.50

MARCH 25, 1995 \$1.25

Oka: the guns point inward

5 years after the crisis, Kanesatake remains an armed camp

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THE GAZETTE

It was like a southern lynching – the night the “critters” showed up.

Shortly before midnight, as most of Kanesatake's 1,130 residents were turning in, seven men roared up to Serge Simon's light green bungalow in two heavy-duty pickup trucks and two American cars.

Lined up 50 feet from his front door, they aimed their headlights through his windows, threatened to kill his family, shouted obscenities at his wife, shot automatic weapons into the air and lobbed three flares onto his roof and porch, starting small fires.

Just another night out at Kanesatake? Not really. But what happened to Simon last June 5 is not unique.

This spring will mark the five-year anniversary of the beginning of one of the most wrenching Indian crises this country has ever witnessed.

Yet though the heady days of the Oka crisis are a distant memory, Kanesatake remains an armed camp. The only difference is the guns are pointing inward.

Once a community united in common cause, Kanesatake has emerged from the Oka crisis in the tragic image of a modern-day Dodge City.

Criminal gangs operate almost with impunity while the community's political leaders not only remain silent but also appear to encourage the situation through their policies and actions.



Serge Simon and his family have been harassed by the “critters,” Kanesatake thugs. He says the community is terrified.

For example, joining in the fun of terrorizing the Simon family, witnesses said, was Robert Gabriel. As the elected council chief in charge of justice and security he is, essentially, the law in Kanesatake.

But in Kanesatake not everything is as it seems and the law often means no law.

Although Simon complained to the Sûreté du Québec, no charges were ever laid against Gabriel or anyone else for threats against his family.

Simon's sin had been to speak out against the band council's housing policy and the lack of law and order in the community.

Five months earlier Gabriel had beaten up another Mohawk who had criti-

cized the council at a public meeting. Nobody made a complaint. No charges were laid.

Though he claims not to condone the gang violence, Grand Chief Jerry Peltier does little to stop it and in fact wields it as an effective political weapon. It's evidence, he says, that Kanesatake is a “cauldron ready to explode” unless extensive land claims are settled.

So Kanesatake has become an unholy alliance between thugs and the band council. Because of Peltier's inaction, the outlaws – derisively referred to by the community as “critters” – enjoy a relative sanctuary. Peltier constantly warns the Sûreté du Québec to stay out of the com-

munity or “force will be met with force.”

The result is that a small group of about 20 people openly flout the law, and the average citizen pays the price in fear and terror.

Car thefts, assaults, drunk driving, drug dealing and gun trafficking go largely uninvestigated and consequently unpunished.

The federal government has poured more than \$14 million into the community since 1990, buying up 157 properties from whites, most of whom are only too

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