

Unit 3

Aboriginal History on Hecla Island



Indian encampment
(courtesy Manitoba Archives).

Figure 11: Early Aboriginal encampment like those of Big (Hecla) Island – Manitoba Archives

Objectives

- to provide students with some insights into life among the Lake Winnipeg Aboriginal people prior to Icelandic settlement on Big Island (Hecla)
- to explore the events surrounding the surrender of the island by Aboriginal people
- to develop an appreciation of the harmonious relationship which developed between Aboriginal people and their Icelandic neighbours
- to learn something about the legends surrounding Aboriginal history in this area
- to stimulate an interest in early Manitoba history, and

- to encourage a fuller more realistic understanding of early Aboriginal relations with The Crown and European settlers in Western Canada

Age Levels

- suitable mainly for students in Middle and Senior Years, but adaptable to younger groups

Advance Preparation

- Considerable familiarity with the outlined material is necessary, so that it can be explained and discussed informally, either in a classroom or an outdoor setting.

Background Information

Before Hecla Island was granted to Icelandic settlers as part of New Iceland in 1875, it was known as Big Island or Big Black Island and was part of the territory of a band of Aboriginal people known as the Big Island Band. The Big Island Band which also used Black Island and the Deer islands, was Anishinabe (Ojibwe, Saulteaux or Saulteur), with close ties to the people of the Sandy Bar or Grassy Narrows Band (who occupied the Riverton area) and the St. Peters Band north of Selkirk. Their forebearers had come west from Ontario to Netley Creek on Lake Winnipeg under the leadership of Chief Peguis in the late 1700s.

People of the Big Island Band lived primarily by fishing, hunting, and trapping, but they had also been exposed to farming by the early 1800s, as a result of their association with the St. Peters (Peguis) Band at Netley Creek and Sugar Point near Selkirk. For example, Thickfoot who was a leading man of the island Aboriginal people at Dog Head north of Hecla Island, owned cattle by the 1870s. Crops were also grown by some of these people, both potatoes and Indian corn, the latter of which had been brought west from Ontario by Chief Peguis' people.

The nearest Hudson's Bay trading post to Big Island was Grassy Narrows House, situated just up the White Mud (Icelandic) River near the present site of Riverton's Centennial Park (on the riverbank a short distance north of the small graveyard). This post, established as a subsidiary of Lower Fort Garry, is known to have operated as late as 1868-72, under Postmaster James Whiteway, and Alexander Henry, the Younger, noted that he had unsuccessfully tried to establish a post there as early as 1805. Extant ledgers from Grassy Narrows House record the names of those who traded there and show that the post served not only the Big Island Band, but other Lake Winnipeg bands as far north as Dog Head. These ledgers also reveal a great deal about the wildlife then being trapped and the goods in demand among Aboriginal people.

By 1875, around the time Icelandic settlers were about to begin settling on the west shore of Lake Winnipeg and on Big Island, the Big Island Band and various other bands around Lake Winnipeg were about to enter into a treaty known as Treaty Number 5 or the Lake Winnipeg Treaty. At that time, the Big Island Band was part of a group of 128

people who inhabited Big Island, Black Island, and Wapang (Dog Head). Another group at Jackfish Head numbered 60. This group evidently had no formal chief, but rather a few "principal men," including one called Thickfoot, who lived at Wapang, and another whose name was *Ka-tuk-e-pin-ois* of the Big Island Band. During treaty negotiations, it was *Ka-tuk-e-pin-ois* who assumed the role of chief for the Big Island Band.

Negotiations were initiated in September of 1875 under the leadership of Alexander Morris, then Lieutenant-Governor of the North West Territories which included Lake Winnipeg. Travelling aboard the new Hudson's Bay Company steam propeller boat *Colville*, piloted by Captain Hackland, Lieutenant-Governor Morris left Lower Fort Garry on September 17, 1875 and first made contact with people of the islands at Wapang Point on September 28. There, an agreement was reached with Thickfoot, who acted as leader of his people and for his part consented to enter into a treaty and to arrange for all Aboriginal people of the islands to meet at Dog Head the following summer.

In July of 1876, the Lake Winnipeg Treaty was negotiated by Commissioners Thomas Howard and J. Lestock Reid, who met with the Lake Winnipeg Aboriginal people, including the Big Island Band, at Dog Head. *Ka-tuk-e-pin-ois* assumed the chief position for the Big Island Band, consisting of 22 families, and acted as their spokesperson during the proceedings. Almost all his people had been accepting treaty money with the St. Peters Band at Selkirk since 1870, but as he had not, he consented now to sign the treaty as long as his band was given Big Island as a reserve. This condition was not granted, as Big Island was to be part of the Icelandic reserve, but the majority of the band still wanted to sign the treaty, which offered them instead a reserve at Badthroat River (Manigotagan) on the east shore of Lake Winnipeg, just south of Black Island. The treaty was concluded on July 26, 1876 and was formalized with the distribution of gifts.

The story of the Big Island Band took a tragic turn during the fall and winter of 1876 when smallpox broke out in New Iceland and ravaged both the Icelandic settlers and their Aboriginal neighbours. The Sandy Bar Band, at what later became known as Riverton, was all but wiped out, its numbers being reduced from about 70 persons to 17 or, by some accounts only 7 survivors. The Big Island Band,

Aboriginal History on Hecla Island

although they had by this time removed from Big Island to their promised reserve at Bad Throat, was almost certainly affected in a similar way. Contemporary accounts by a doctor who was sent to tend epidemic victims state that some of the infected people from the Sandy Bar Band fled to the east side of Lake Winnipeg, carrying the smallpox with them and in turn infecting the bands there. This cycle repeated itself until uninfected bands isolated themselves. No statistics on survivors are available, but it is known that some campsites on the east shore of Lake Winnipeg were wiped out entirely. At Sandy River, for example, about 200 people were found dead when the doctor arrived, guided by John Ramsay. Everything in the village houses, teepees, even a Hudson's Bay Company warehouse full of furs was set ablaze in an attempt to arrest the further spread of the disease.

Despite the tragedy of the smallpox and the appropriation of Big Island for settlement by Icelandic immigrants in 1876, the survivors of the Big Island Band and the people of neighbouring

bands developed a harmonious relationship with their white neighbours during the years that followed. They demonstrated, by all accounts, the ideals of charity, compassion, and brotherhood, which were an integral part of their traditional way of life, and while some might feel that there were grounds for animosity towards the newcomers, virtually none was shown. On the grand scale of things, both Aboriginal people and the newcomers were, after all, fellow sufferers at the mercy of nature.

One of the oldest surviving Hecla Islanders, Helgi G. Tomasson, recalls how his father emphasized the principle of co-operation and mutual respect in all dealings with Aboriginal people. "Be good to the Indians and treat them with respect," he was told as a young man. "They kept your grandparents alive during the first years here." Over the many years since his first visit to the east side of Lake Winnipeg, Helgi found Aboriginal people to be both friendly and hospitable, and a close working relationship was maintained until recent times. These ties led to



Figure 12: Aboriginal graves similar to those described at Icelandic River – Manitoba Archives

annual social events as well, including the Victoria Day picnic on Hecla Island, when four or five boats from across the lake would arrive with enough people to form a baseball team.

Today, very little is known of the lives of the Aboriginal people who once occupied Big Island and there is almost no trace of their former presence here. Only one place name recalls the days when they camped on the island, this being *Indiana Alda* (Indian Ridge), a low ridge of land in the marshes on the southwest end of Hecla Island. This spot, somewhere south of the Hecla Island toll booth, is said to have been an Aboriginal campsite in the early days.

The customs of the Anishinabe were very different from those of the Icelandic settlers, and among the most unusual to Europeans, were Aboriginal burial customs, as described in the following account written by Fridrik Sveinsson during the first years of the Icelandic settlement.

On one occasion during the summer of 1876, a group of Indians came up the river on bark canoes, bringing with them the body of one of their departed brothers, which they left on the river bank... It could not be called a burial, as no grave was made, but the body-wrapped in cloth and bark-was surrounded by posts set in the ground, with higher poles to both ends. On these poles were carved pictures of animals and fish, which were presumably the 'totems' of the deceased, and a bag of tobacco, together with a pipe and a bag of tea, was tied to one of the poles. This was likely for the benefit of the soul of the deceased on its journey to the Happy Hunting Grounds in which the natives believed. We boys found these burial customs strange indeed.... (Thorleifur Jackson)

Certain spots were selected as sacred grounds for the dead—at least one site on the east shore of Big Island, another on the north shore of Black Island, and at least two sites on the banks of the White Mud River, dubbed the Icelandic River following the arrival of the settlers.

One sacred spot on Hecla Island was on the point of land in Section 34-24-6E, part of a homestead known as *Holl* (Hill) or *Fagurholl* (Fair Hill). This point of land, which is still wooded today, lies just east of the main road not far from the Joe Johnson residence. For many years the road followed a different route than today, lying out and around the point itself, and this stretch of road which passed through a dark corridor of heavy bush and old growth trees,

was often avoided after nightfall, as it was reputedly haunted by the spirits of the dead. There are also believed to have been sacred grounds somewhere in the vicinity of Hecla Village itself, and possibly north at Gull Harbour, near the dock.

The ceremonial ground on Black Island, still known today, is on the north shore of the island. The old grounds are left undisturbed now and a new ceremonial ground has been selected further east along the north shore. Aboriginal people still come to this spot each summer, to pick blueberries and to celebrate their heritage.

Activities

A) Grassy Narrows House Ledger

Study the sample page from the 1872 ledger of Grassy Narrows House, which was the Hudson's Bay Company trading post the Big Island Band traded with, and see what you can discover about the lives of Aboriginal people and the way the fur trade was conducted (Figure 13). The writing, which is the hand of Postmaster James Whiteway, is surprisingly easy to read, despite the fact that many words are spelled the way he pronounced them rather than as we spell them today.

- Notice how James Whiteway wrote at the top of his ledger "Fair Tread." What do you think this is supposed to mean? With what accent do you think James Whiteway spoke?
- Notice the six columns at the right side of each page. The first three columns are marked £, S, ¢, and the next three have the same markings. Have you ever seen the £ symbol before? Where? The symbols mean £ = English Pounds Sterling, S = Shillings, and ¢ = Pence. This was the currency of England and Scotland at the time, and also of British North America.
- The first three columns are for Debits, which are expenses incurred by the trading client. The second three columns are for Credits, or money earned by the trading client. Notice, for example, the first entry is for "32 P Musques," for which the client earned a credit of 8 Shillings. What do you suppose the "32 P Musques" were? (32 pelts muskrats) Notice the next entry for "2 Hs Tea" (2 pounds [0.9 kg] of tea), which cost the client a debit of 8 Shillings.

Fair Tread at Grassy Narrows

January	Brought of / By	F	S	D	F	S	D
2	32 P Musquies					8	
1872	2 Hs Tea		8				
	By 1 P Skunk			6			
	4 Hs Cannoa Pitch					3	
	1/2 H Tea		2				
	1/2 Skene twine #1		1				
	2 small hells			6			
January	Asbesten						
3	1 Bever teen Trouses & Pair	10					
	By 1 P Large Bever					6	
	1 1/2 H tea		6				
January	By 1 more skene				1		
15	1 Yds in Pint Cotton	16	10	6			
	1 1/2 H tea		6				
	1 red twine #9		1				
	2 yds white Cotton		2				
January	Candpa son Moose						
26	By 1 Large Dark Brown Bever				1	10	
	1 H tea	4	4				
	1 H sugar	2	2				
	3 yds white Cotton		4	6			
	1/2 yd of Cloth		6				
	1/2 yd of Ribbon			6			
	1 Com Cotton shirt	4	6				
	1 1/2 H tea		6				
	1 Gray Cap 3/4 ell		1	10			
	1 Bever teen Trouses	16	16				
	1 Large Moose skene				1		
	1 can Milk	15				10	
	1/2 yd of Ribbon	20			1		

Figure 13: Page from Grassy Narrows House ledger 1872 - Hudson's Bay Company Archives

- What other wares did Aboriginal people bring in to sell at the post, for which they were issued credits (three columns right)?
- What sorts of things did they purchase (debits columns)?
- What kinds of animals seem to have been abundant in the area?

B) Crafts

If the group has an opportunity to go beachcombing and exploring, they might want to gather found objects and material for making Aboriginal-style artifacts. A few possibilities are:

- feathers for hair clips or headdresses
- clam shells for necklaces or rattles
- ochre (yellowish powder found between loose slabs of limestone) for face paint (mixed with a little vegetable oil or grease)
- pebbles with holes in them
- ripe pin cherries or chokecherries for face paint

These items might be used in a project to follow up your visit to Hecla Island. Some further ideas for projects can be found in W. Ben Hunt's *The Complete How-To Book of Indiancraft* (see Selected Bibliography).

C) Treaty Number 5 (The Lake Winnipeg Treaty)

As a follow-up activity, students might be assigned to research the terms and circumstances of Treaty Number 5 (see Appendices), which included Hecla. The focus of such research and analysis might be an objective evaluation of the inherent fairness or unfairness of these dealings in light of the historical circumstances. This, in turn, could be tied in with research into present day conditions on reserves in the Lake Winnipeg area.

D) Ikwe

An excellent film entitled *Ikwe, Daughters of the Country*, has been made recently by Gimli film maker Norma Bailey and is available from the National Film Board. It would serve as a good follow-up activity as it depicts the life of Lake Winnipeg Native during the early days of the fur trade. Two sequels deal with subsequent generations of Aboriginal women and tie in well with Aboriginal issues.