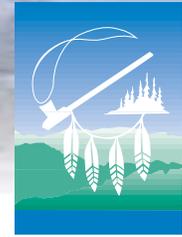


The Facts on Claims

Indian Claims
Commission

Fairness in
claims negotiation



THE FACTS: WHAT IS ORAL HISTORY?

Oral history is the general term commonly used to refer to all types of traditional aboriginal knowledge stored and passed along by word-of-mouth. It includes both **oral history** and **oral tradition**.

Experts distinguish between the two. To them, **oral history** is knowledge based on the experience of the person speaking, usually recollections of events the person saw, heard of, or took part in. **Oral tradition** is knowledge that goes back many generations. It may take the form of laws, myths, songs, stories, or fables. It may be found in place names or phrases in a traditional aboriginal language. Weaving, masks, totem poles, carvings, and other symbolic creations may be used by some First Nations to record information.

First Nations across what is now Canada used many different ways to memorize and explain events, laws, and other knowledge accurately and fully; the oral word was considered more important than the recorded word. The Plains Cree, for example, protected their oral history through “keepers”, who were the only people authorized to tell certain stories. When the keeper passed the story to another person, the story had to be told exactly as it was received and the original keeper of the story named each time.

At these gatherings it is necessary to observe extreme caution in what is said, as, though they have no means of writing, there are always those present who are charged to keep every word in mind. As an instance of the manner in which records are in this way kept, without writing, I may mention that, on one occasion, at Fort Frances, the principal chief of the tribe commenced an oration, by repeating, almost word for word, what I had said to him two years previously.

Dominion Land Surveyor S.J. Dawson,
writing to his superiors in Ottawa before
negotiating Treaty 1

Although First Nations now use written English, French, or sometimes, aboriginal languages to record events and important information, aboriginal oral history and tradition remain strong.

EXAMPLES

- **Gitksan and Wet’suwet’en feast system**
The Gitksan and Wet’suwet’en First Nations of British Columbia hold regular feasts where laws, pronouncements, history, and land ownership are formally recited or sung for all to hear and confirm.
- **Chippewa place names**
In 1999, archeologists “discovered” that people had gathered for 2000 years at the mouth of Ontario’s St Clair River to fish and trade. The Chippewa name for the area is Aamjiwnaang, which means “where people meet by flowing water.” Their oral tradition tells of generations of people trading fish and exotic goods and materials. The 410,000 artifacts found confirm that First Nations have lived there since the time of Christ.
- **Iroquois wampum belts**
When British officials presented the *Royal Proclamation of 1763* to Chiefs at Niagara, the Chiefs gave them in return several two-row wampum belts. The two parallel rows of beaded shells represent the First Nations’ understanding of the *Proclamation* – two nations living peacefully side by side. Each carefully woven wampum belt, bearing different symbols depicting events or agreements, is held by “keepers of the wampum” – designated elders entrusted to “read” them and explain their meaning.

ORAL HISTORY AND TRADITION IN THE COURTS

Until recently, the courts favoured written history and treated most aboriginal oral history and tradition as hearsay – information from someone who was not directly involved and, therefore, information given less weight in court. In 1997, the Supreme Court of Canada stated in the

Delgamuukw decision that oral history should be “placed on an equal footing” with written history. The Court noted that it would put an “impossible burden of proof” on aboriginal peoples if it did not consider oral history since that was the way First Nations kept records. The *Delgamuukw* decision means that oral history can no longer be excluded automatically and that it will be examined and weighed as rigorously as written history before being accepted as proof.

ORAL HISTORY AND TRADITION AT THE INDIAN CLAIMS COMMISSION

The Commission has included oral history and tradition as part of its inquiry process since its creation in 1991 because they are important

sources of evidence in specific land claims. Through sessions held in First Nation communities, Commissioners hear directly from elders and others regarding their knowledge of the history of the claim under inquiry.

MORE INFORMATION

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