

# Wigwam village goes up

## Surviving



GINO FERRI

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The e-mail I received on Nov. 21, 2002, sounded interesting, yet challenging. It asked if staff from Survival in the Bush, Inc. (SITB) could plan, develop and supervise the construction of an authentic wigwam village.

Once the details were ironed out via e-mail, Rachel Fournier and Sheri Taylor, both members of the Chippewas of Georgina Island, and I decided to meet and finalize the specifics of this rather unique project.

However, before continuing, let's paint a picture of this band of Ojibwa, situated literally on the doorstep of the GTA.

Georgina Island is a First Nation reserve located on the southeastern regions of Lake Simcoe. It's the closest aboriginal reserve to Toronto, being approximately 60 kilometres (or an hour's drive) north of the GTA. The island is surrounded by a number of touristy urban centres including Sutton, Keswick and Beaverton. A 15-minute ferry ride separates the island from the mainland.

Approximately 250 Ojibwa (also called Chippewa) live on the reserve. Most of them are descendants of the original settlers who moved here in 1864. Those initial inhabitants came from the Coldwater and Snake Island regions.

Today, Georgina Island is governed by an elected tribal council. It runs its own ferry, police, education, fire, sewer, water, roads and sanitary facilities.

During the last few years, it has developed a series of scenic-educational-historic trail systems, commissioned a study of the island's flora and fauna,



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St. Mary's High School teacher, Gino Ferri stands beside a partially constructed wigwam.

and completed a development plan to attract tourists.

To this end, it will soon have a string of B&B homes. Members of the band also rent out lovely cottages on the lake, run a horseback riding facility, rent out scenic campsites and operate wonderful craft shops featuring local artists.

Finally, as many avid anglers know, Georgina Island is located in one of the most dynamic and diversified fishing and boating areas in the province.

In January, when Fournier and Taylor sat down with Jennifer Khan and me as instructor with SITB, the nuts and bolts of the project were thoroughly discussed. In essence we decided on the following:

- A total of five authentic wigwams would be built.

- Four of the structures would be covered with elm bark purchased from a supplier in the Ottawa Valley. The remaining wigwam would not be covered, thereby showing people the detailed method of its construction and

lashing technique.

- Cooking tripods and drying racks would also be built to complement the wigwams.

- Stretched furs would be strung on traditional hoops and frames adding ambiance to the entire site.

- All poles and saplings were to be harvested from the island.

- I was hired to oversee and supervise the entire project from start to finish.

We decided to commence work early in July.

Prior to any construction taking place, village elders invited us to participate in the project. The elders played a key role in blessing the construction site. I was honoured to be asked to conduct the smudging ceremony.

The entire project took well over six weeks to complete.

All wigwams, racks, frames, hoops, and tripods were strategically built along a wonderful trail system aptly called Nanabush Trails, The Path of the Chippewas.

Ultimately this authentic village will

be used as a teaching area. Elders are planning to use it to teach the youth about their rich aboriginal culture, traditions and legends.

Three full-time and three part-time members made up the construction crew, while numerous aboriginals and local police officers assisted us daily by peeling poles, lashing racks and stretching furs.

Everyone experienced the art of working with rawhide and cutting large skins into long strips called babiche, which was used to lash and tie sheets of elm bark onto the parabolic frames.

A TV crew from The Great Outdoorsman Show was on hand to record much of the village construction and tape many of the island's natural, historic and geographic features.

What a great experience!

*Dr. Gino Ferri is the director of Survival in the Bush, Inc. He is also a teacher at St. Mary's High School.*