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Rich in Davis
Inlet: 'I was a nasty
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THE FIGHT OF

**CHIEF KATIE RICH IS BATTLING TO FREE THE
DAVIS INLET INNU FROM A NUMBING CYCLE
OF ADDICTION, VIOLENCE AND SUICIDE**

SPECIAL REPORT

BY JOHN DeMONT

Even now, decades later, the memories return to her like the fragments of a long-ago dream: the crunch of snow beneath the dog sled, the eternal silence of the landscape that stretched as far as the young Innu girl could see. Katie Rich remembers the fragrance of the tree boughs laid on the tent floor, the welcoming heat radiating from the small portable stove where her family cooked their meals, the voices of her mother and the other women as they told the old tales of *tshakapesh* (man in the moon) and *kueuatshu* (wolverine) in their tent after dinner each evening. These are the best memories for Katie Rich: the hard, good life her family once lived on the Labrador Barrens.

Then, there is the reality of Davis Inlet, her home for the past 26 years. Tonight, it is five children out on the snow-covered ice, rambling in their Innu tongue and reeking with the smell of the gasoline fumes they had inhaled. The oldest is 9, the youngest five years old. But if anything, their colorful stocking caps, boots and snowsuits make them look even younger as a social worker and two Innu teens bundle them into the makeshift clinic in Davis Inlet. They are coherent and in good spirits by the time Rich, the solemn-looking chief of the immensely troubled community, arrives. She stays anyway, serving glasses of water and ketchup-slathered hotdogs to the children. By now, she has seen the awful ritual repeated countless times in her community, where the fumes of a gasoline tank are the refuge from the pain of life. But this scene, on a bitter December night, left her reeling. "What can we do to stop this?" she asked wearily. "It just breaks your heart to see this happening to our children."

Her voice was characteristically calm—but there was no mistaking the anger, frustration and grief behind the words. All her life she has lived with the appalling horror of her people, the Mushuau Innu, who are the descendants of nomadic hunters. The Innu now wallow in poverty and neglect on a tiny island off Labrador's northeast coast where, they insist, they were tricked into settling. Davis Inlet, in fact, stands as the bleakest possible demonstration of what happens when aboriginal and white cultures collide head on. By anyone's definition, the community of 500 is a frozen hell on earth where drug abuse, alcoholism, sexual abuse of children, suicide and domestic violence run unchecked.

Its future, if it depends upon any single person, hangs on Rich's shoulders. The burden is immense: in November, she resigned as chief under pressure from her family and out of frustration with intractable gov-



ernment, Roland Dicker, who does not support the leadership role she plays in the community, confronted a *Maclean's* photographer taking her picture. Her place, Dicker angrily told her as the couple relived an old argument, was at home with her four children, aged 10 months to nine years.

It was, in most ways, a typical day. Rich, 33, reacts to both good news and bad with sphinx-like detachment. But when something strikes her as funny, her merry eyes dance and she laughs easily. "I don't have time to let emotions get in the way of what I'm trying to achieve here," she explained, puffing on the latest of many Belvedere cigarettes. And what she and the other Innu leaders in Davis Inlet are trying to achieve is nothing short of a miracle.

She seems an unlikely savior, sitting in her hooded parka, sweatshirt and snowboots. She is a short, squarely built woman with shoulder-length dark hair parted in the middle. Although she didn't speak a word of English until she was 13, Rich is known throughout Canada mainly as her band's thoughtful, articulate spokesman. But she also calls shots from behind the scenes, where she has emerged as a tough negotiator with the various levels of government.

The jurisdictional lines are sometimes confusing. The province funds a host of services in Davis Inlet, including schools, a health clinic and general store. At the same time, under a five-year, federal-provincial agreement signed in 1991, Ottawa pays 90 per cent of a \$19.5-million program that covers budgetary shortfalls and water and sewer systems in both Davis Inlet and Sheshatshiu, a settlement about 400 km to the south, where Labrador's remaining 800 Innu live. Last February, the band laid out a seven-point action plan for governments' role in their renewal. While some of their demands—such as self-government—were sweeping, others were specific. Last year alone, the federal government has responded by pouring \$7.8 million into, among other things, new housing and drug and alcohol counselling. Still, most of the Innu's core demands have gone unheeded—including relocation to the mainland Labrador site of Sango Bay, 11 km to the west, which provides better opportunities for hunting and the water and sewage systems that Davis Inlet sorely lacks.

Newfoundland Premier Clyde Wells maintains that other possible sites have to be considered before a final decision is made. And last week, Canada's new Indian affairs minister, Ron Irwin, appeared noncommittal about funding a move to Sango Bay, which he estimated would cost about \$80 million—even though Rich maintains that he had given her a verbal promise to do just that once money is found. "If I could write a

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ermments in Ottawa and St. John's, Nfld. Even she was surprised by the outpouring of support from across the country that followed. But the ultimate decision to stay on to lead the stricken community was rooted in something deeper than ego or obligation. "I was a nasty person, a bad person," she told *Maclean's*, "and I guess I've tried to make up for how I lived." She—like Davis Inlet—is searching for redemption.

By mid-morning that same day, the walls were already closing in on Rich. She had much to ponder as she sat in her sparsely furnished office decorated with children's drawings and a hand-written "Chief" sign taped to the door. For one thing, there was the persistent rumor that Ottawa wanted to move her settlement to a location near Schefferville, an almost deserted Quebec town 300 km to the southwest, instead of to the site on the Labrador mainland that they want. The previous night, another gang of teenagers was caught in the woods inhaling gasoline and talking of suicide. To top it off, only minutes earlier, her

cheque myself, I would do it tomorrow," Irwin told *Maclean's*. "But I want to go in there and see the total component" (page 26).

Now, instead of being merely defeated, the Davis Inlet band is angry. And no one better epitomizes this militant new mood than Rich, a woman who normally exudes a Zen-like calm. It was she, after all, who orchestrated a tense confrontation last month between band members and RCMP officers and a judge who had handed down several court sentences that the Innu viewed as excessive. Six youths escaped in the commotion after Rich and other band members stormed into court and handed Judge Robert Hyslop a letter ordering him out of the community. Later that day, six Innu men convicted of crimes escaped after an RCMP four-wheel-drive vehicle was upended and 150 Innu youths surrounded a cabin sheltering the judge and his officials. Last week, after a rash of vandalism in the community, the RCMP returned at Rich's request to take the 12 men into custody.

It was also Rich who expressed anger and disappointment after

PHOTOGRAPHY BY PETER SIBBALD

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learning in late December that Wells refused to reopen negotiations with the Innu, and that Irwin had postponed a fact-finding mission to the community until February in response to the unrest. "We are tired of having the decisions which affect our lives made in St. John's or Ottawa," she says. "We have to be free to make our own decisions, even if it means making mistakes."

Then again, it is hard to imagine anything being more of a mistake than Davis Inlet. The tiny string of buildings looks its best in winter—a fortunate fact for a place where temperatures dip as low as -40° C and rarely top 20° C. Warm weather turns the soil to muck and defrosts the piles of garbage and human waste outside the small, sparsely furnished homes where as many as a dozen people live without sewage systems or running water. Even when snow covers the ground, there is an apocalyptic feel to the settlement, where packs of wild dogs root for food behind the single store and solitary snack bar, and snowmobiles, the only mode of winter transportation, roar across the landscape like giant, angry insects.

Davis Inlet burst onto the world's consciousness last January when six gasoline-sniffing children were pulled from an unheated shack on a frigid night, screaming that they wanted to die. The army of reporters who descended on the settlement told of a place where the sense of hopelessness is so profound that many young people see death as the only alternative. Now, most of the reporters have moved on to other stories, but conditions are no better. "We still live like animals," explains George Rich, 31, a huskily built vice-president of the Innu Nation. "Nothing has changed."

If anything, the sense of despair is even deeper among the young, most of whom do not work or attend school. Consider the mounting list of snowmobile thefts and break-ins. Or the stoned and drunken teens who sometimes roam the streets carrying rifles and threatening to kill themselves. Perhaps the most telling examples of the overwhelming nature of the problem are the 17 local teenagers who travelled last February at Ottawa's expense to Poundmaker's Lodge, a rehabilitation clinic near Edmonton that is run by natives for natives, to break their addiction to gasoline fumes. "Most of them are all sniffing again," reports Bob Piwas, 30, a member of the settlement's four-person Innu police force. But, he says, a relapse is not surprising in a community where 40 young people have been identified as chronic gasoline users. On new year's weekend, some of the same children, high on gasoline, broke into an RCMP cabin and a school where they caused minor damage before police arrived.

In truth, hardly a day goes by when the badly overworked force does not catch someone sniffing gasoline or some other brain-cell-killing solvent from pieces of garbage bags in the woods around the settlement, or on the surrounding frozen ice. It is a practice growing in popularity among young Innu for its hallucinogenic qualities. On one particularly grim night recently, a group of teens barricaded themselves in a "safe house" set up for counselling substance abusers and began inhaling a mixture of gasoline and cleaning compounds before staff members broke into the room.

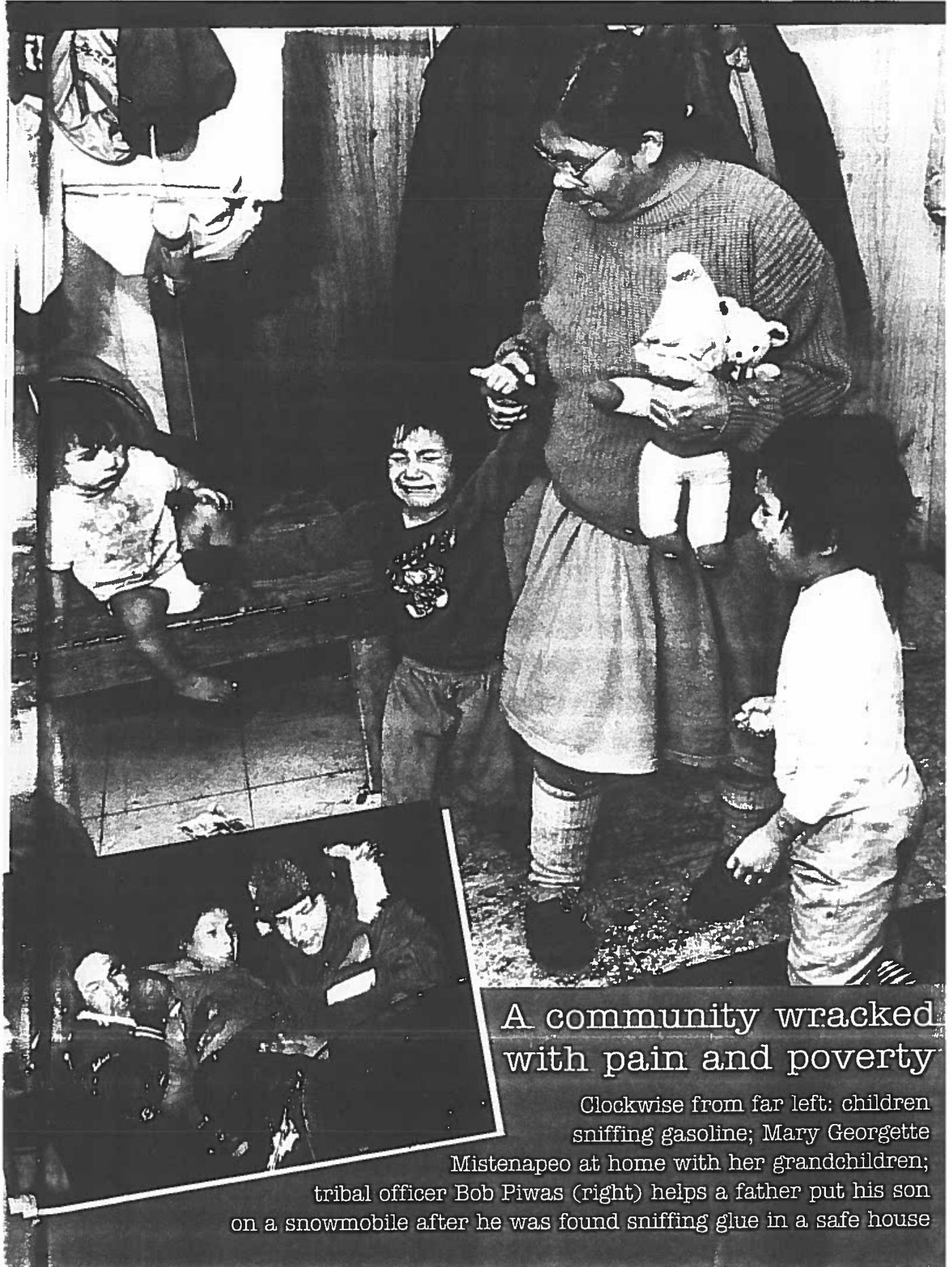
It gets worse. For most people, alcohol—whether homebrew or liquor and beer brought in by air from the mainland—is still the largest problem. Most of the area's crimes are linked to alcohol use, including more than 50 deaths since 1973. But the most wrenching sign of the bleakness of life in Davis Inlet is the shocking number of those who try to kill themselves: since February, 1991, there have been 109 suicide attempts in a settlement of only 500 people, although just two were successful.

Who can really blame the young, in particular, from being dispirited? Many were sexually assaulted or beaten by family members, while others grew up being neglected by alcoholic parents. At best, the youths feel that all they can look forward to is the same awful existence as their



parents. "I don't see much to be hopeful about," declared Gabriel Rich, an 18-year-old who has contemplated suicide. "Why bother setting any goals? Alcohol will always get in the way."

Katie Rich can sympathize with that sense of hopelessness. She was born in North West River, a settlement 200 km south of Old Davis Inlet, the site of a Roman Catholic mission and general store where her Innu band lived in tents during the warmer months. But during the seven months of winter, they roamed the Barrens near the Sango River. Like their ancestors for the past 6,000 years, Rich's



A community wracked with pain and poverty

Clockwise from far left: children sniffing gasoline; Mary Georgette Mistenapeo at home with her grandchildren; tribal officer Bob Piwas (right) helps a father put his son on a snowmobile after he was found sniffing glue in a safe house

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family seldom stayed more than a few nights at a single campsite. Life was hard: outbreaks of tuberculosis were common and starvation threatened when the caribou herds suddenly disappeared. All the same, Rich's memories of the period are overwhelmingly positive. "Our home was the land and we were happy," she recalls. "There were no social problems, no problems whatsoever." That was before 1967, when they joined hundreds of other Innu from the area and moved to Davis Inlet, which the native people call Utshimassits—literally "the Bosses' Place." Then, everything changed.

The decision was made on April 8, 1965, when 21 of 30 Innu families from Old Davis Inlet voted to move to a site three kilometres to the north rather than a location further inland. The Innu now claim that they were manipulated at the time. The chief villains of the piece, from their point of view, were the officials of the Newfoundland government who, they say, promised heated houses and running water and sewage systems in the new community on tiny Iluikoyak Island—a commitment that St. John's denies having made. But they also blame the Catholic Church for bringing its influence to bear on the vote. Equally persuasive was Katie's grandfather, Chief Joe Rich, a man now reviled by many Innu as a traitor who sold out his people. "I think about him often," his granddaughter explained. "He wasn't a bad man, just too trusting of the priest and the people the province sent."

What happened to her family is no different from the experience of virtually every other Innu who moved to Davis Inlet. The water and sewage systems never came. Moreover, her parents, Philip and Monique Rich, lost their bearings: unable to go into The Country, as they call the Barrens of Labrador, to hunt for long months of the year, they found themselves without a sense of purpose. Eventually, they stopped going hunting at all. All the time, their drinking got worse. Often they rose at 4 or 5 a.m. to begin the new day's round of visits to the houses of their drinking buddies. When they finally returned home to their four sons and two daughters, the violence was of such a scale that Katie, their eldest daughter, still cannot speak about it without tears welling in her eyes.

The experience left her defeated and ashamed. "I thought that maybe it was normal to live in these terrible conditions," she recalled. "Maybe we didn't deserve better." The easiest way to escape the pain was to jump aboard the same brutal cycle. She drank heavily: homebrew, beer, whisky. Twice, she even sniffed gasoline.

She tried to break away by attending high school at church missions in Corner Brook and St. John's and by studying for a year in the arts program at Memorial University of Newfoundland, also in the provincial capital. But making the transition to white cities was simply too jarring. In 1980, she returned to Davis Inlet and settled into the same pattern of alcohol abuse and violence as her parents.

Then, one day a decade ago, came the epiphany that changed her life. A hard-drinking couple she knew asked her to carry some groceries over to their house. Inside the frigid building, Rich found several children huddled around a stove that had gone dead because there was no wood to fuel the fire. "It shocked me," she recalled. "I remember thinking that things have to change around here. We need to do something for these children."

In 1983, she took her last drink. And she started paying more attention to her own young offspring. That same year, she began to play a larger role in the community when she became vice-president of the Labrador Native Women's Association. In 1988, she took a job as executive assistant to the chief of the Innu band. Four years later, when the chief's post fell vacant, friends and supporters urged Rich to run.

She had her doubts: for one thing, the band had never elected a female chief. Another potential problem was that her husband, Dicker, a school maintenance worker, is white and might be distrusted by the Innu. Then, there was the matter of her checkered past, which she feared would prevent people in the community from taking her seriously. Yet

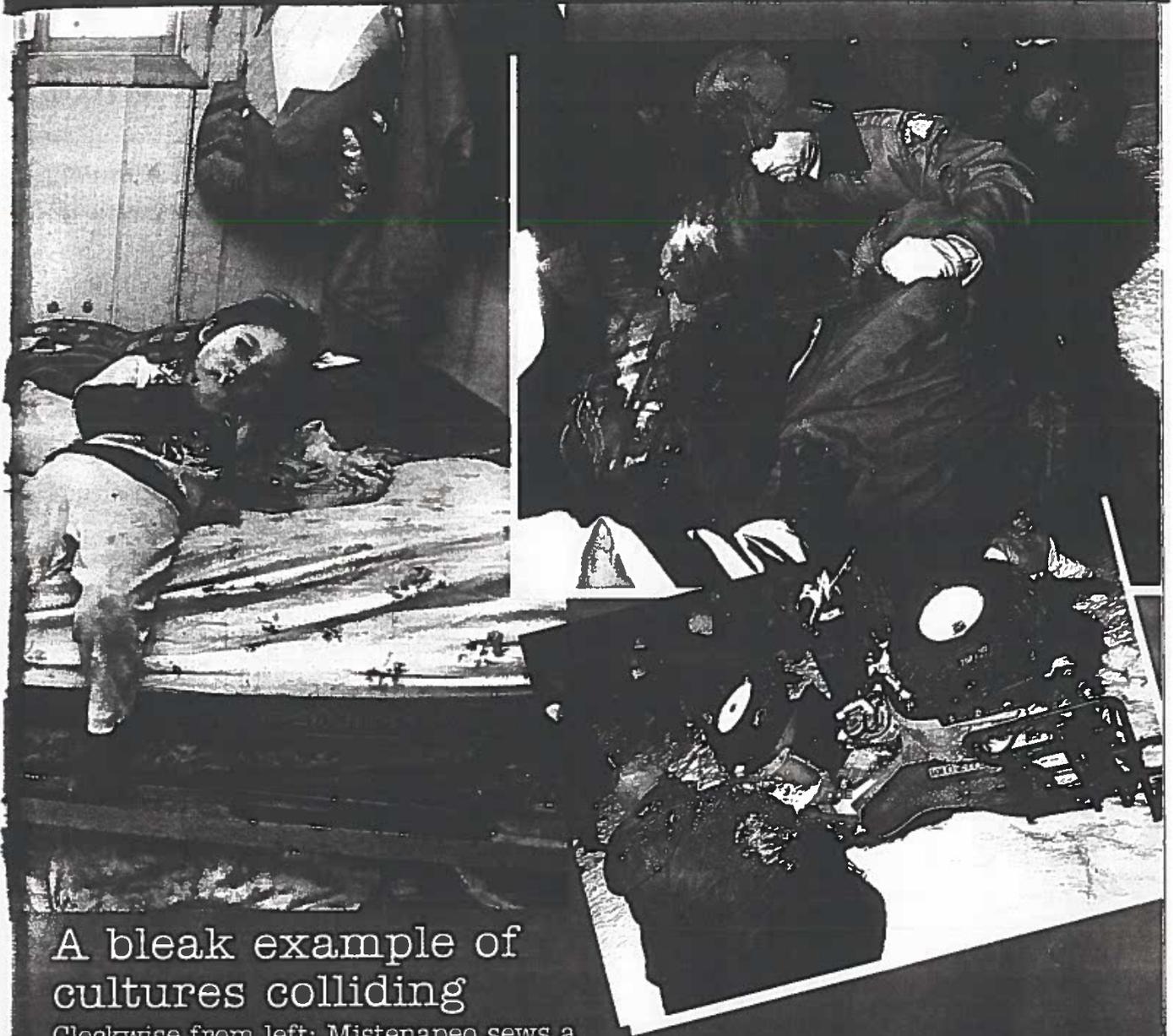


what outweighed those concerns, in her mind, was a chance to have a real impact on her community. On April 1, 1992, the people of Davis Inlet voted overwhelmingly to give her that opportunity.

It is just past noon on an overcast day as Rich trudges across the hard-packed snow with her blue parka zippered shut against the cold. She smiles at a knot of laughing schoolchildren, and greets a pair of adults who speed past on a snowmobile. Her first term as chief ends on March 1, and any doubts about her leadership abilities have long since disappeared. "Katie has done a great job of presenting our issues to the outside world," says Prote Poker, her predecessor as chief.

The question is: who is listening? Not, it seems, the governments. The native healing centre that the Innu have requested is no closer to reality. Ottawa and Newfoundland's 1991 promise to spend \$4 million on a water and sewage system and a new health clinic is on hold as the settlement's future location is debated. Most of all, the two governments are still reserving judgment on the band's demand for a new home and a new lease on life. Twenty tents sit empty at Sango Bay, their preferred mainland site. It has plenty of drinking water and abundant fishing. It is also near the caribou hunting trails that were the Innu's lifeblood for centuries, and from which they are now cut off for much of the year until the ocean surrounding Iluikoyak Island freezes to allow crossing by snowmobile.

Governments, however, have their concerns. "For heaven's sake, just take a look at history," Wells told *Maclean's*. "Sango Bay is as isolated as Davis Inlet and offers no more economic opportunities. I have concerns about the ability of the people of Davis Inlet to have a better future if they move there." All the same, Wells says the province would not stand in Ottawa's way if it decided on Sango



A bleak example of cultures colliding

Clockwise from left: Mistenapeo sews a moccasin while her granddaughter looks on; the police and Innu clash after villagers chase court staff out of town; Innu overturn a police four-wheeler

Bay—even though St. John's would not help to fund the relocation.

So how, in the face of all of this evidence to the contrary, can Katie Rich honestly say that she is hopeful about the future? "Davis Inlet has hit rock bottom and has begun to heal," she declares firmly. "We're starting to take back control of our own lives." In fact, she can point to the exact turning point—the terrible night in February, 1992, when six young children died in a house fire while their parents were out drinking.

The tragedy shook the community. Since then, the rate of alcoholism among adults has fallen from as high as 90 per cent to as low as 10 per cent by some estimates. Equally important, the Davis Inlet Innu for the first time have examined what happened to bring them to this awful state, and why. Their inquiry was a cathartic experience.

During the hearings, person after person gave voice to the betrayal they felt at the hands of the Newfoundland government that they say moved them under false pretenses. They spoke of the lack of self-esteem fostered by the Roman Catholic missionaries who told them that

their old beliefs and ceremonies were heathen. They told of the anguish and confusion they felt living with a foot in both the white and native cultures, but not really being part of either.

When the painful self-examination was complete, many adults discovered something they never knew existed—a sense of pride. "The children are starting to feel it, too," says one teacher at Nukun Mani Shan School, Davis Inlet's only school, a kindergarten to Grade 12 facility housed in a modern, computer-equipped building. "For the first time ever, they are starting to speak of themselves proudly as Innu." And with that newfound self-esteem has come the growing realization that ultimately only the Innu can save themselves.

Few people understand this better than 24-year-old Gregory Rich, the father of the six children who died in that tragic 1992 fire. Now a recovering alcoholic, he is one of 17 Davis Inlet residents being trained as counsellors to deal with substance-abuse problems. "Like all of these kids, I grew up thinking that I and all Innu were worth-

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less," he says. "It makes a difference knowing we are as good as anyone."

For Simeon Tshakapesh, the discovery also came as a revelation. He started sniffing gasoline at 11 and turned to the bottle at 16—the same year that both of his parents committed suicide while under the influence of alcohol. But three years ago, he went on the wagon after almost stepping on his infant daughter during a drunken domestic squabble. Now 26, Tshakapesh says he attends Alcoholics Anonymous meetings and heads up the four-member Davis Inlet native police force. "It is up to the people," he explains. "The insanity of alcohol and substance abuse we are living is a cycle which is very hard to break. But once it is broken, we will see a lot of change."

Back in the wooden Innu band building, Rich confers with co-workers. After bumming a cigarette, she walks slowly back into her office. She is, she confesses, tired: tired of watching children kill themselves, tired of arguing fruitlessly with governments, tired of the nightly fights with her partner Roland, tired of work days that never seem to end, tired of spending 15 days a month on the road away from her children. "I never thought I would be in a position where I would be responsible for a whole community," she says. "I never thought I would be a leader."



The village of Davis Inlet: warmer weather turns the soil to muck and defrosts the piles of garbage and human waste outside the small homes

Many nights, it is simply too much. Then, before going to bed, she weeps in despair over her inability to make more headway against the overwhelming problems facing her people. Her family wants her to quit; she herself has not made up her mind whether to run for a second term as chief.

But, seated at her desk, her spirits seem to soar as she considers people like Gregory Rich and Simeon Tshakapesh—and when she thinks of the increasing number of young and adult Innu who are going back into The Country, for months at a time, to hunt and live like their parents before them. "We can never go back to being what our parents were," she explains. "But unless we begin to recover our Innu culture, we will never know who we are." She, after all, can still remember what life was like on the Barrens, when her people lived in harmony with the harsh land that had always sustained them, and that is now, perhaps, their last, best hope for renewal. Do those days seem like a long time ago? "An eternity," she says, her voice dropping almost to a whisper. □

'We have hundreds of Davis Inlets'

Davis Inlet has become a symbol of all that is wrong with the way Canada's natives are governed. But Indian Affairs and Northern Development Minister Ron Irwin says he cannot allow himself to be hypnotized by symbols. His department, with a budget of \$4.7 billion, is responsible for 604 reserves across the country—plus scores of Inuit communities dotted throughout the North. While Irwin acknowledges that the problems of Davis Inlet are real and pressing, it is not the only troubled place in his domain. "We have hundreds of Davis Inlets in Canada," he told *Maclean's* last week. To solve the big problem at Davis Inlet would take money—about \$80 million to move the community from a small island off the Labrador coast to a less isolated spot on the mainland. Irwin says he has no objections in principle to the demand by the Davis Inlet Innu to move to the mainland—but there simply is no money available. "I've made it clear that there's no \$80 million set aside to make the move," he insists. "If I could write a cheque tomorrow, I would do it, but I don't have that power."

Irwin, 57, was a surprise choice for the Indian affairs portfolio, although few were surprised that someone who once said he would consider donating his right arm to help Jean Chrétien defeat John Turner in the 1984 Liberal leadership contest would get a seat at the new Prime Minister's cabinet table. Conventional wisdom gave the job to Ethel Blondin-Andrew, a Dene Indian from Fort Norman, N.W.T., who settled for lesser cabinet rank as junior minister for training and youth. But Irwin, a former mayor of Sault Ste. Marie, Ont., says he did not come to the task blind. As a lawyer in the Sault, he worked as general counsel to two local Indian bands and to the Ontario Métis Council. "I came into the ministry as sort of a sleeper," he says. Still, Ovide Mercredi, national chief of the Assembly of First Nations, complained after Irwin's appointment that the new minister is an unknown. "To put someone there who doesn't understand our issues means we have to train him," said Mercredi.

Irwin is a burly, plain-speaking man who served one term as an MP from 1980 to 1984, working with Chrétien as a parliamentary secretary during constitutional negotiations. Defeated in 1984, he returned to politics last year with a victory in his Sault riding. He would have preferred to learn his new responsibilities away from the glare of publicity. "I've tried to low-profile these things," he says. "I just want to sit down quietly and try and solve these problems."

Things did not turn out that way: just as Irwin was about to make an initial visit to Davis Inlet on Dec. 20 to learn its problems firsthand, natives ordered RCMP officers and a judge out of the settlement. Irwin postponed his visit to February, arguing that to go would give tacit blessing to the small revolt. "It sends the wrong message that confrontation works if I had gone in there," he says. Irwin then found himself in a spat with Davis Inlet Chief Katie Rich, who last week accused the minister of reneging on a pledge he made to her in a telephone call to approve the move—an assertion Irwin denies. Irwin says the dispute has not changed his opinion that Rich is doing able work under trying circumstances. "I am very sympathetic to her," he says. "I have a lot of respect for what she's doing." But, Irwin adds, Rich must understand the financial pressures that the government faces.

Irwin says that while there may be no money to fix the big problem at Davis Inlet, there is no excuse to leave smaller problems unresolved. He wants to look at how the justice system works, at education, health, skills training and other issues. It is an approach that he says prevents him from being overwhelmed by the problems confronting native people. "Just because it's difficult, we can't just ignore it," he says. "We can no longer be the *mea culpa* ministry. We have to go out there and solve the problems that First Nations have." Irwin's upcoming visit to Davis Inlet will put that policy to an early and critical test.

WARREN CARAGATA in Ottawa

