**Jim Clark Keeping the Ojibwe Language Alive**

When I was a kid, it was hard to keep our Indian languages alive in the schools I attended.  I was sent to two Indian schools run by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA).  The first was in Hayward, Wisconsin, where I spent four years, and the other was in Wahpeton, North Dakota, where I went for one year.

In Hayward, most of the kids were Ojibwe, but most of them could not speak our language.  It seems like a lot of the kids from Minnesota were able to speak Ojibwe more so than the kids who lived deeper into Wisconsin.  In Wahpeton, there were kids from other tribes, so this is where I heard different Anishinaabe (Indian) languages – Lakota/Dakota, Cree, and Cheyenne.

When we first went to Hayward, we were not allowed to speak Ojibwe or speak of our religion.  We were told everything in Indian was just imagination and “hogwash.”  I had a hard time with English, so a lot of the boys used to laugh at me because my English was so horrible.  I used to say to myself, “Someday I will speak as well as anyone.”  Been trying ever since.

We Ojibwe speakers used to get together on weekends.  We were allowed to play out in the woods, so we played like we were home and talked in our language.  We wouldn’t let non-Ojibwe speakers go with us because they would tell on us for speaking Ojibwe, and we were punished.

We were encouraged to write a letter to our parents once a month and were given a stamped envelope.  The letters were censored before mailing.  Cars were scarce and so was money, so we didn’t get many visits from our parents.  My father was fortunate to have a car, but then there was the money part.  But he did come for visits about three times a year, which was a lot better than some of the other students.  Some stayed at the school year-round from kindergarten through the eighth grade.  I know that’s where they lost their language.

In the classroom, it seems to me we were forced to learn.  I kept misspelling “arithmetic.”  The second time I had to write it a hundred times.  The third time, Mr. Scott had me in front of the class while he slapped the palm of my hand with a ruler.  I’d hate to see him again because I still misspell arithmetic!

Another time I was sent to the principal’s office.  I was asked a question, and I was to answer “no.”  But I answered, “gah ween,” which is how we say no in Ojibwe.  So I had to wash the blackboards in the classroom for five days after school in addition to my regular assigned dormitory job.

After two years in Hayward, the BIA relented on the language, so we spoke a lot of Ojibwe after that.  The only thing I am sorry about is that I was at school and didn’t get to attend any of the traditional Ojibwe ceremonies performed during spring and fall, so I was and am naive about a lot of traditional ceremonies used now.

But I never did lose any of my language.  When we tried to practice our English, my grandmother told us, “You are not a chimokomaan (white person).  You were given a language to use, so use it.”

I hope I have not offended anyone by writing this – that is not my intent.  These are just my thoughts.  Mii gwetch (thank you).