Minnesota Now (MPR) | Minnesota Now How religious conversion changed Minnesota's North Shore 01H28XGK4QGQRTHQ53RJA38GSS

CATHY WURZER: We're going to go next to the Canadian border. Our friends at WTIP North Shore Community Radio looked into the history of Catholic missionaries on either side of the border as part of the award winning series *ItHappensHere.* Producers Leah Lemm and Staci Drouillard have more.

SUBJECT 1: In the process of usurping, attacking, downplaying, dispelling, ridiculing, shaming, traditional Anishinaabe religion, all kinds of things happened.

LEAH LEMM: [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH] Hello. I'm Leah Lemm, a Mille Lacs Band member and independent producer and host of the *Native Lights Podcast.*

STACI DROUILLARD: And this is Stacey Drouillard, a Grand Portage Ojibwe descendant and WTIP producer.

LEAH LEMM: *It Happens Here* is an ongoing series that highlights the history and experiences of people of color on the North Shore.

STACI DROUILLARD: Historian and Author Tim Cochrane opened this episode using many different words to describe how Catholicism impacted the Ojibwe people here on the North Shore of Lake Superior. The Ojibwe word for Frenchmen is [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH] or "men of the waving stick." This is in reference to the priests who came to the Great Lakes bearing crosses along with their bibles.

The first priest to arrive at Grand Portage was Father Charles Messeger, who accompanied the traitor and Explorer Lav Randrai, who arrived at the mouth of the Pigeon River in 1731 with his entourage of men.

LEAH LEMM: There are still many physical reminders of Jesuit influence, including St. Francis Xavier Church in Chippewa City, Holy Rosary Church in Grand Portage, and Father Borraga's cross, a marker built at the mouth of the Cross River it commemorates the priests' safe passage across Lake Superior in 1846. The overt mission of the Jesuits was to convert Indigenous people to Catholicism, a component of colonization that essentially contained people on one side or the other of the newly formed international border.

SUBJECT 2: When treaty payments started, both agents on both sides of the newly inscribed border would basically say, you only get treaty money one place. You're either going to get it because you're a British Indian, a British Canadian Indian, or you're an American. And so there was a lot of footsy going on by Indian agents of basically throwing people off of treaty payment rolls because they were Canadians or because they were Americans.

But this made no sense at all to the Anishinaabe people in this region at the time. They crossed the border on a daily basis. They might fish on one lake and wild rice on another, hunt on another, catch their food in another place.

So the border, of course, made very little sense to them. And they were basically swept along and split in two.

STACI DROUILLARD: The actual border was formally resolved in 1842 as part of the Webster Ashburton Treaty, an international treaty between Canada and the US, which physically split traditional Ojibwe territory at the Pigeon River. The division was enforced with the help of the Jesuit missionaries who attempted to convert even the most staunch Ojibwe traditionalists, including the North Shore Headman, Atikons, or "Little Caribou."

SUBJECT 2: Who researched what it meant to become a Catholic, and was willing to take instructions in the Catholic faith, but, ultimately, he rejected that and returned to Grand Portage. And in that period, the Jesuits were quite unhappy with Little Caribou, because he didn't convert and he didn't stay of the Jesuit faith.

LEAH LEMM: In 1849, seven years after the border was established, the Mission of the Immaculate Conception was built on the Kaministiquia River in Ontario. The mission complex, which included a day school, was later moved to the Fort William First Nations Reserve in 1908.

SUBJECT 2: One of the things that missionaries liked to do was to keep Anishinaabe people from moving as much and to make them into agriculturalists, make them into assimilated good citizens that stayed in place. And so if you were a Methodist missionary, you wanted them to stay nearby where the church was.

Or if you were a Jesuit, you wanted them to stay near the mission of immaculate conception. So there was this separation of people by religious faith that had as much to do with where people ended up as where their homeland was. So an awful lot of Catholics at the time ended up in Fort William, and a number of traditional Anishinaabe people ended up in Grand Portage.

STACI DROUILLARD: While researching the history of Manang, Isle Royal, Tim uncovered historical documentation that the Holy Rosary Church on the Grand Portage reservation, which was constructed in 1865, was built on the site of the [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH] Lodge, or Grand Medicine Lodge, the place where the traditional spiritual practices of Ojibwe speaking Anishinaabe people were held. I asked Christina Woods, a Boys Fort band member and the owner and trainer of Diversity Consulting, LLC how she would characterize this seemingly overt takeover of a spiritually significant place.

CHRISTINA WOODS: That one, I would classify as manifest destiny and the right of the church to determine what is best for someone else. And that is part of colonizing. So the Doctrine of Discovery is still alive and well.

And the churches have been in that role to support it. It came from the church. And it supports conversion and the importance of conversion into what it is to be, in this instance, a proper American.

LEAH LEMM: Grand Portage Band member and Cultural Teacher John Morin takes this connection a bit further when he works with high school students who are learning more about Indigenous history.

SUBJECT 3: So then I also teach them about those papal bulls, of where the Pope in the 1400s, 1451 and 1493, set a spiritual standard for the world, which that spiritual standard would be Christianity. And then a book that reinforces that everybody has got to be a Christian. And if you aren't, then you're not really a human being.

The explorers can take possession of your lands. So those papal bulls, those kids got to learn the beginning of a mindset about us as human beings.

LEAH LEMM: The spiritual standards set by the Pope and carried out by the Jesuits not only divided Ojibwe people and families by religion and citizenship, it also altered the way we interpret some of the most well known landmarks on the North Shore, by changing the Ojibwe name and twisting it into an English interpretation of that place. Here's more from Tim Cochrane.

SUBJECT 2: The one that we've talked about before is about the little spirit cedar tree. And, of course, its Anglo name of "witch's tree." So anything in any place sort of upwelling of religious potency is not viewed as spirits or importance of spirits, it becomes bad spirits. It's not Christian spirits.

So it becomes a witch tree. It becomes something that's bad. Another example of that, I lived just across the River from Devils Track River. And that, again, has a pretty pejorative sense of it. And some of the translations of the river, at least initial ones, are really, really beautiful, such as the Spirits Walking Place on the Ice River. That's a far cry from Devils Track River, don't you think?

STACI DROUILLARD: Tim sums this up as a purposeful dismantling of Lake Superior borderland Ojibwe culture.

SUBJECT 3: This dismantling of Native culture and religions can be very direct, like the one you talked about of basically building a church on top of a former religious ground-- or nearby one. Or it can be very subtle tweaking of language. Or it can be as, I think most people know, more direct things like just suppressing Indigenous languages, which occurred as well.

So it was not one or two things. It was a whole chunk of things coming at the Grand Portage community that had an impact.

LEAH LEMM: Colonization brought with it a suppression of Native culture in all forms, including the right to speak one's own language. Tribal communities in the United States were not legally able to practice traditional spirituality, which forced Native cultures to go underground until the Native American Religious Freedom Act passed in 1978. The efforts of forced conversion continue to impact tribal communities throughout the United States and Canada. For WTIP, I'm Leah Lemm.

STACI DROUILLARD: And I'm Staci Drouillard. This series is a production of WTIP North Shore Community Radio. Support for this series comes from the Minnesota Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund.

CATHY WURZER: That's Staci Drouillard and Leah Lemm with the award winning series *It Happens Here-- The Roots of Racial Inequality on the North Shore.* Thank you to Staci and Leah and to WTIP North Shore Radio for sharing episodes of the show with us.