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**FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES**  
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**A Field of Dreams: The Story of the Manitoba Indian Agricultural Program**

**BY**

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Of**

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## Abstract

Historical Developments in First Nations agriculture provide an essential element for understanding the current state of the industry in the First Nations across Canada. Equally important is a comprehensive understanding of specific policies and programs undertaken by governments to assist First Nation farmers. One of those endeavors, the now defunct Manitoba Indian Agricultural Program (MIAP), is the subject of this dissertation.

This study is concerned with chronicling the fate of MIAP in order to ascertain the difficulties and accomplishments encountered by MIAP, as well as analyzing the problems and prospects of First Nations agriculture in general. An historical background of First Nations Agriculture in Manitoba, as well as a brief history of MIAP, are undertaken in order to situate the program within Canadian Indian policy.

The implications of the demise of MIAP are discussed, as is the contemporary situation of First Nation agriculture post-MIAP. Further insights and implications of the demise of MIAP are discussed in order to outline the present strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities for First Nation agriculture. Recommendations on government policies are also discussed in order to highlight possible future First Nation economic development initiatives.

Findings suggest that MIAP's problems mostly originated from a failed government policy, which included a lack of commitment for adequate funding, long term programming, and farmer education and advisory services as well as a lack of accountability and sufficient checks and balances within MIAP's Board of Directors. MIAP's other problems originated from a lack of commitment from First Nations governments and organizations, particularly in the support of First Nations agriculture and the settlement of land tenure issues.

MIAP did have a number of successes as well. Chief among those successes is the high level of achievement made by First Nations farmers during the MIAP period when compared to the situation that exists today. There were more farmers producing more produce from more land and receiving more income from farming than at present. MIAP farmers also were able to spread the awareness of the potential for farming to other prospective farmers, and in so doing, they acted as role models for the entire agricultural industry on First Nation communities. Most importantly, however, is the fact that the MIAP experience can be used to develop a blueprint for any future

agricultural policies in First Nations communities.

Despite the problems experienced by MIAP, the situation of contemporary First Nations farmers has deteriorated and is certainly worse than during the MIAP period. Reasons for this deterioration include the weaknesses in post-MIAP programs and policies, most notably the Canadian Aboriginal Economic Development Strategy (CAEDS). Discussions of Internal Colonialism and Political Economy arguments are also given as reasons for both MIAP's demise and the general problems with contemporary First Nation agriculture. Recommendations are made for creating a viable First Nations agricultural sector in Manitoba.

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For a non-Aboriginal person to penetrate the distant world of the Manitoba Indian Agricultural Program is not easy. Ideally, one would wish to be inside the mind of every First Nation farmer, advisor, and MIAP Board member as each walked through their daily activities. To see this world as viewed through their eyes is an impossible task. To see this world without merely restating the obvious or being motivated by an agenda that *naively* tries to help First Nations peoples is also a challenging undertaking. However, I would not have been able to even approach what understanding I do have without the help of some Aboriginal friends to whom I am deeply indebted. First among these I must mention Nahanni Fontaine, who initially discussed MIAP as a possible topic area with me while doing work for Tribal Wi-Chi-Way-Win Capital Corporation. I must also thank Larry Amos formally of the Tribal Wi-Chi-Way-Win Capital Corporation, who allowed me access to the wealth of files on MIAP available at Facs Records. Mr. Amos has encouraged and nurtured my curiosity about MIAP, and has been more than generous in clarifying the complexities of MIAP.

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## **Chapter One**

### **Introduction**

#### **Introduction**

Historical developments in First Nation agriculture provide an essential element in understanding the current state of the industry in First Nation communities. Historically, a number of difficulties have contributed to problems in the development of Aboriginal agricultural endeavors (Wotherspoon and Satzewich, 1993). One of those endeavors, and the subject of this study, is the Manitoba Indian Agricultural Program (MIAP). MIAP, which operated from 1975 until operations ceased in 1993, was based on the British Columbia Indian Fisheries Assistance Program (established in 1968), which involved loans and grants to make Aboriginal fishermen more competitive in that Province (Wotherspoon and Satzewich, 1993). MIAP was funded through the Federal Government and sought to promote, assist and support First Nation participation in the agricultural sector. While in operation, MIAP was the primary source of support, training and technical assistance for First Nation farmers in Manitoba (Tribal Wi Chi Way Win Capital Corporation, 1999).

#### **Purpose**

Since the story of MIAP has never been investigated academically, the purpose of this research is to document the historical development of MIAP in order to analyze the problems and prospects of First Nation agriculture in Manitoba. MIAP represents a key component in the history of First Nation Organizations in general and First Nation agriculture in particular. Therefore, such investigation will also shed light on how the discontinuation of MIAP has affected contemporary First Nation agriculture in Manitoba in addition to highlighting the implications of government Indian policies towards First Nation agriculture.

#### **Objectives**

The objectives of this study are to chronicle the history of MIAP, to document both its accomplishments and weaknesses, to shed light on the reasons for its demise, to illustrate

contemporary First Nation agriculture in Manitoba following the demise of MIAP, to offer perspectives on government Indian policy in regards to First Nation agriculture and to offer policy recommendations towards First Nation agricultural policies.

## **Methodology**

My approach to the study involved a detailed review of program documentation and MIAP data together with unstructured interviews with MIAP farmers, Board members and other officials involved or knowledgeable about the program such as officials at DIAND, the Manitoba Department of Agriculture and Manitoba First Nation organizations. In brief, my methodology consisted of the following:

1. Review of program description literature including policy manuals, Treasury Board Submissions and previous consultant reports.
2. Review and, where appropriate and possible, conduct quantitative analysis of information in MIAP files including client files, training and corporate machinery files, minutes of Board meetings, and loan and contribution ledgers.
3. Interviews with former Board members and former staff of MIAP, including head office staff as well as field staff.
4. Interviews with a sample of MIAP client farmers and representatives of Manitoba First Nation organizations such as Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs (AMC) or the Southern Chiefs Organization (SCO).
5. Interviews with officials of DIAND, Manitoba Agriculture, FCC and Credit Union Central of Manitoba, Special Agricultural and Rural Development Agreements (Special ARDA), and any Program Auditors.

## **Review of Documents**

Since MIAP is no longer in operation, it was necessary to locate the files concerning the program. I procured the help of Larry Amos, former Chief Executive Officer of Tribal Wi Chi Way Win Capital Corporation, and discovered that all MIAP files had been placed in storage at Facs Records Centre on 47 Gomez in Winnipeg. The wealth of information contained in the MIAP files has been placed into an imposing pile of 300 boxes with no clear delineation of categories. I

attempted to add to my research by accessing potential documentation at Indian Affairs and the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs, but all documents concerning MIAP had been removed to the present MIAP file location at Facs Records or did not exist any longer. As a result, all documentation on MIAP appears to be at the Facs Records Centre. Other than what exists at Facs Records Centre, there appears to be very little in the way of documentation on MIAP. Neither the University of Manitoba Library, FCC, or Special ARDA documents nor the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) (1996) appear to have any direct reference to MIAP (though RCAP does make general reference to Aboriginal agriculture in Canada). Therefore, the literature review on MIAP is based primarily on the documents procured from the MIAP files deposited at the Facs Records Centre. In addition, it should be noted that, according to Gord Van Hussen (2002), the former Training Officer for MIAP, the MIAP files at Facs Records are incomplete and many files were lost or destroyed shortly after the demise of the program.

Furthermore, the original intent was to abstract data from all client files to provide a complete picture of MIAP's clients, and to develop a data base using the file data as inputs to facilitate analysis. Unfortunately, it was sometimes impossible to compare data over the length of the MIAP tenure due to the fact that much of the file data was missing or contradictory and that which was available was not always presented in the same way. Also, my intended analytical procedure had been to trace production and financial information over the MIAP tenure (1975-1993) to gain an appreciation of changes that occurred during the life of the program or to compare the situation with non-Aboriginal farmers in Manitoba. However, only a handful of files had complete financial information over the period and there was very little information on production figures. In other words, insufficient data has limited the ability of this study to draw conclusions based on production or financial figures during the lifetime of MIAP. In addition, three different MIAP evaluations (see Intergroup, 1983; DPA Group 1990; Fossay and Cassie, 1993) all come to the same conclusions regarding MIAP data, with Intergroup (1983: 29) stating that, "the data required for such evaluation are often either non-existent or contradictory." The DPA Group (1990:4-8) goes even further by stating that:

Skepticism is warranted in light of other known deficiencies in the database, e.g. sample unrepresentativeness (it is predominantly comprised of data from the top performing farmers), possible double counting of mixed farm enterprises (i.e.

reported both under the grains and the livestock category), and inconsistencies and additional data misgivings. Tentative observation should therefore be qualified by these general misgivings.

Despite the shortcomings of the MIAP data stored at Facs Records, an assessment of the program was made based on the information which was available. Discrepancies in database figures are noted and certain inconsistencies were checked with interview evidence in order to achieve reliable data conclusions.

Furthermore, in order to access the files at Facs Records, Tribal Wi-Chi-Way-Win insisted, for legal reasons, that all farmers names be omitted from the final copy. I was able to get further data from the First Nations Agricultural producers Survey (1999), a survey that was delivered to Manitoba First Nation farmers and included an initial contact list made up of MIAP loan clients.

### **Interviews**

From the loan client list provided by the First Nations Agricultural producers Survey (1999), I was able to locate and administer unstructured interviews with a number of First Nation farmers who utilized MIAP. Many of these individuals had given up on agricultural pursuits; many others were reluctant to get involved; and of those who agreed to interviews, all asked to remain anonymous due to the controversy surrounding the MIAP program. In addition, I was able to get valuable information from a number of individuals involved with MIAP or who had an intimate knowledge of the program. These included Jim Miller, former Economic Development Officer with Indian Affairs, Stan Bear, of Romanow and Bear Associates and Gord Van Hussen, former MIAP Training Officer. No one at either the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs (AMC) or the Southern Chiefs Organization (SCO) were interested in being interviewed. As well, no one from Manitoba Agriculture, Farm Credit Canada (FCC) or those connected with Special Agricultural and Rural Development Agreement (Special ARDA) were willing to be interviewed. Of the interviews conducted, none were able to provide absolute production, sales, land development or income figures.

The remaining chapters will discuss the historical background of First Nation agriculture, MIAP and the contemporary period. Chapter Two gives an historical background to First Nation agriculture before the MIAP period, while Chapter Three discusses First Nation agriculture in

Manitoba during the MIAP period. Chapter Four provides a commentary on the accomplishments of MIAP and Chapter Five examines the weaknesses found in the program. Chapter Six examines the aftermath of the MIAP program by analyzing contemporary First Nation agriculture, current agricultural policies and the implications of those policies while Chapter Seven looks at the future of First Nation agriculture and offers a number of policy recommendations culled from a variety of sources including government, RCAP, the Manitoba First Nations Strategic Plan, and other sources. Chapter Eight offers some final concluding comments regarding MIAP based on my own observations and analysis.

## Chapter Two

### The Past: Historical Review of Aboriginal Agriculture

Agriculture has played a role in the livelihood strategies of First Nation in Manitoba since around the time of the first treaties (Miller, 1991; Carter, 1991). However, other Aboriginal groups such as the Iroquoians of the eastern woodlands (Hurons, Mohawk, Oneida, Senaca, Onondaga, Cayuga, Neutral, Tobacco etc.) areas of eastern Canada, shared a strong corn, beans and squash-based agricultural subsistence whereby up to 80% of their food derived from agricultural pursuits (Steckley and Cummins, 2001). As Friesen (1997: 67) states;

When the French first came into contact with the Hurons they were essentially being introduced to some of Canada's most successful farmers. Contrary to popular myth, Canadian agriculture did not begin with the Alberta or Saskatchewan Wheat Pool! By Canadian historical standards, farming in this country has virtually an "ancient" history.

In Manitoba, the creation of the reserve system, which accompanied the treaty-making process, meant that First Nation people would no longer be able to pursue traditional activities such as hunting, fishing, gathering and trapping, etc. as the sole source of their livelihoods (Dickason, 2000). The limited land base afforded by the reserve system, coupled with the dwindling of the bison, which had been so important to the economic well-being of First Nation people across the prairies, meant that an alternative economic base would have to be developed.

With the creation of the reserves, it was generally understood at the time that traditional livelihood strategies would no longer be sufficient for First Nation people (Carter, 1991). With limited territory available, it became clear that a more sedentary lifestyle would be required; and the treaty process sought to facilitate this as well. The crown held the view that agriculture, just as it lured thousands of Europeans into Canada, would be the ideal industry to sustain First Nation peoples on reserve. In addition, many government officials saw agriculture as a way to assimilate First Nation people (Treaties, 1978). Further, the First Nation people themselves, as they saw their traditional strategies rendered useless by over-hunting, land transfer and a burgeoning European presence, saw agriculture as an opportunity for self-sufficiency in changing times, as illustrated by Cree Chief Sweetgrass.

We heard our lands were sold and we did not like it; we don't want to sell our lands; it is our property and no one has the right to sell them. Our country is getting ruined of fur-bearing animals, hitherto our sole support, and now we are poor and want help - we want you to pity us. We want cattle, tools, agricultural implements and assistance in everything when we come to settle - our country is no longer able to support us (Buckley, 1992: 34-35).

As Buckley (1992) and Carter (1990) note, the terms of the treaties across western Canada were pretty much the same. They included: a grant of land, the Queen's protection, a small per capita annuity (with higher accounts for chiefs and councilors) and basic farming tools, namely: two hoes, one spade and one scythe for each farming family; one plough for every ten families; five harrows for every twenty families; and (for each band) one axe, three saws, a grindstone, an auger, carpenter's tools, seed, one yoke of oxen, one bull and four cows (Cloutier, 1957). Agriculture, it seems, was essential to the reserve concept.

Even at the time, these treaty provisions were by no means generous. Instead, they reflected the desire of the government to minimize obligations to First Nations while at the same time, securing the peaceful relations required to ensure swift settlement and establishment of the new Canadian economy (Wotherspoon and Satzewich, 1993). Although they were traditionally hunters and had no real experience living in permanent settlements, the First Nation people of the Canadian plains were keen to establish themselves in agriculture. Many could see the times were changing rapidly, and their historical predisposition towards changes and adaptability assisted them in accepting new circumstances and, in some cases they began to thrive (Rupert's Land Research Centre, 1992). At first, there were early success stories in the transition to agriculture. For example, the Dakota people arrived in Manitoba with agricultural experience from the United States. They planted gardens and raised cattle on their reserves (Elias, 1991). In fact, one of their chiefs planted test crops and ranked among the earliest farmers to plant the newly developed Red Fife wheat (Romanow, Bear & Associates, 2000; 34-35). An inspector at one Dakota reserve declared the wheat crops to be "as fine as any I had seen among white settlers" (Buckley, 1992: 34-35). Elias (1988: 222) also gives further account of the Dakota peoples who; "...developed strategies based upon the soil and an increasing experience in commercial agriculture..." Mayer (1985: 35) also talks of the interest in farming among the Cree, stating:

The Red Earth Crees, who had earlier fled the chaos of the Plains and settled in a marshy delta where the Saskatchewan River flows into lake Winnipeg, made a new life based on potato growing and cattle, which they acquired for themselves, becoming completely self-sufficient

Others provided further evidence of successful Aboriginal involvement in agriculture. For instance, Deputy Superintendent of Indian Affairs, Frank Pedley (in Rothney, 1975: 183) when discussing Aboriginal agriculture noted: "The most satisfactory and encouraging feature of the situation is the demonstration of the possession by the Indians of a spirit of independence and of sufficient self-reliance to enable them to hold their own under comparatively difficult conditions."

However, there were detractors to this position as noted by S. Swinford, Indian Agent at the Manitowapah Agency near Portage la Prairie who stated that, "the hard, steady work necessary to keep the land free from weeds and prepare it for the next year's crop is so contrary to the Indian nature that it makes grain-farming a distasteful occupation" (In Rothney, 1975: 183). Sounding like a Chicago school type of opinion (see Wotherspoon and Satzewich, 1993), which holds that "elements of Aboriginal culture create a culture of poverty" (Wotherspoon and Satzewich, 1993: 3), these detractors seem to be arguing, much like Naglar (1975) does that the Aboriginal cultural system breeds a culture of poverty. Naglar (1975), believes that Aboriginal people are unable to succeed and achieve economic mobility because of the absence of a culturally-sanctioned work ethic and the lack of emphasis on the value of education when compared to non-Aboriginal people. Such views frequently override consideration of the material factors behind the culture involved. Thus, what Naglar interprets as a cultural trait of Aboriginal people may instead be a rational reaction to their own circumstances. Consequently, the surface phenomenon of apparent cultural traits are often blamed for poverty. As Wyatt (1973:45) states when paraphrasing several books (published in 1971 and 1972) on the life of Canadian Aboriginal people:

Both the poor and the savages are uncivilizable - not successful in city civilization and not easily made successful. For both, the failure to be civilized is attributed to the failed themselves: savages remain savages because they lack culture; the poor remain in the culture "of poverty" because its values, rules, and expectations are learned early in life. Outside influences are never cited as causes for failure."

However, contrary to this Chicago school of thought, Carter (1990), Elias (1991), Buckley (1996), Wotherspoon and Satzewich (1993) and The Royal Commission for Aboriginal Peoples



feel that the failure of reserve agriculture was not due to lack of effort or interest on behalf of First Nation people, but was the direct result of inappropriate policies implemented by the federal government. As the Royal Commission For Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) notes:

In the decade after 1885, government policies made it virtually impossible for reserve agriculture to succeed because farmers were prevented from using the technology required for agricultural activity to succeed in the West. The promotion of reserve land surrender after the turn of the century further precluded the hope that agriculture could form the basis of a stable economy on the reserves. (RCAP, 1996: 868).

This view is shared by Buckley (1992: 36) who states:

As things turned out, the hoes and scythes which the treaties promised were soon obsolete, as were the wooden ploughs and the oxen, and for the next hundred years reserve agriculture floundered, as government continued to deny its legitimate needs. This is but one example of what makes a literal interpretation of the treaties untenable in any but a strict legal sense

Another argument against the failure of Aboriginal agriculture on reserves, as expounded by Tough (1996), involves the fact that off-reserve farm labour became an important component of the post-1870 Aboriginal economy. Indian Commissioner Simpson reported in 1871 that; "...in the province of Manitoba, where labour is scarce, Indians give great assistance in gathering in the crops and I found many farmers whose employees were nearly all Indians" (Canadian Sessional Papers, Indian Affairs, 1872: 31). Another annual report in 1901 noted the example of Aboriginal participation in off-reserve farm labour in Sandy Bay, stating that; "The greater part of the adult male portion of the band came down to work in the Manitoba grain fields during harvest and threshing" (Canadian Sessional Papers, Indian Affairs, 1801: 98). Tough (1996: 202) stated this "was seen as distracting from reserve development." He goes on to give examples:

Indian Agent Jackson argued that the Ebb and Flow band 'go out to work with farmers a good deal and neglect their own places.' Similarly, [Indian Agent] Swinford recorded that Indians "can get such steady work at good wages with the settlers that it is difficult to keep them on their reserves long enough to look after their own little farms in a proper manner." In this sense, farm wage labour conflicted with reserve gardening and the policy priorities of the Department of

Indian Affairs (Tough, 1996: 202).

As a result, the failure of reserve agriculture during this time, can be attributed to the attraction of off-reserve farm labour opportunities, and not due to cultural traits or simply the failure of government policies.

However, others point to government policy, which was heavily influenced by the thought that Aboriginal peoples cultural traits were uncivilized, as the reasons for the failure of on-reserve agriculture. Early agriculture policy on reserves played a small role within a larger policy framework for dealing with First Nation people and settling them into the reserve system (Buckley, 1992). The main policy goal, beyond economic development, was the civilizing of a people that were largely viewed as inferior. This overriding policy goal was set up within a larger plan that involved missions, residential schools, farm instructors and a large team of civil servants, including "Indian Agents" who set out to absorb First Nation people into the mainstream economy (Buckley, 1992: 39).

It was this overriding belief that Aboriginal people were backward and inferior, a view held by key government officials that led to the establishment of policies which not only did not facilitate development, but entrenched dependency and poverty into the First Nation communities. One of the early architects of Indian policy on the prairies for the federal government was Hayter Reed. Beginning his civil service career as an Indian Agent, Reed's beliefs and approaches led to his bureaucratic rise to Deputy Superintendent General of Indian Affairs in 1893. Reed held the belief that the Aboriginal people were inherently inferior. He believed it was the government's responsibility to manage the affairs of the "ignorant savages" (Carter, 1990: 142). Under Reed's leadership, the role of the Indian Agent was solidified as a paternalistic dictator who should readily utilize his power and control within the Indian reserves to forcibly change Indian character and culture.

By 1884, Aboriginal leaders were complaining that treaty obligations were not being honoured (Rupert's Land Research Centre, 1992). The supplies agreed upon in the treaties proved inadequate, and frequently seeds, tools, oxen, and rations that First Nation had been promised never arrived (Treaties, 1978). The governments reply was that "the Indians had no good reason for serious complaint.... They were most generously treated by the government far beyond any expectations they could have entertained under the most liberal interpretation of the treaties"