



A Passion for Radio
Radio Waves and Community
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Chapter 3

To Tell the People – Wawatay Radio Network

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Fifteen hundred kilometres northwest of Toronto, Canada's largest city, sits the Cree village of Sandy Lake in the boreal forest. The settlement is one of about 30 with a community radio station linked to the Wawatay Radio Network (WRN).

For five weeks in the winter an ice road stretches into the white distance from Ghost Point on the shore of Sandy Lake. Trucks carrying gasoline and building supplies from the south ply the road carved over dozens of frozen lakes dotting the Canadian Shield. When the road melts, the village will once again be accessible only by air, the same as all but a handful of the more than 40 villages that make up the Nishnawbe Aski Nation. The ice road season is the time for much visiting between relatives from different villages who don't see each other throughout the remainder of the year.

The villages of the Nishnawbe Aski Nation are spread throughout an area about the size of France. It is the ancestral home of about 20,000 Oji-Cree and Cree-speaking Indian people. Some have maintained the traditional hunting and fishing way of life. Many more, through years of paternalistic government policies, have become dependent on handouts. Millions of government dollars are spent on welfare payments, and almost none for native economic development in this remote area.

Sandy Lake's fifteen hundred inhabitants make it one of the larger settlements. In the summer, Ghost Point's rough hewn log stage sets the scene for Treaty Days. Government Indian Affairs agents come every year (formerly by ten day canoe voyage, now by air) to honour their treaty obligation to hand out 5 dollars to every living soul at a feast held for the occasion. They have been coming since 1910, the year the Sucker clan

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gave up 31,000 square kilometres of land for an initial payment of \$970, with a promise that the King “for as long as the rivers run” would provide flour, bacon, tea, shot, powder, fishing gear and a school on a reserve that eventually took the form of 44 square kilometres on the lake shore.

The first representatives of the Canadian government appeared in Sucker clan lands in 1909. Police officers came to take away their leader, He Who Stands in the Southern Sky, also known as Jack Fiddler. Fiddler was charged with murder for exercising the chief’s duty to end the agony of the pain-ridden incurably ill when all else had failed. Far away from the forest, in a Royal North West Mounted Police jail, Jack Fiddler, the old chief of a people who had never relinquished sovereignty of their ancestral land, slipped away from his guard and killed himself rather than submit to white man’s justice. His brother, taken with him, died later of tuberculosis in Stony Mountain Penitentiary three days before a federal government pardon order reached the prison. Back in the forest, Jack Fiddler’s bewildered people soon gave up their land to the agents of the “Great White Father.”

Sixty years later, Jack Fiddler’s grandson, Chief Thomas Fiddler, founded Wawatay Native Communications Society, based in the small town of Sioux Lookout. Another of his clansmen, James Fiddler, founded the community radio station in Sandy Lake before he died of tuberculosis at the age of 28.

The James Fiddler Memorial Radio Station occupies a rough one story wooden building just up the road from the Sandy Lake nursing station. In front, a pile of firewood waits to be taken in to the large wood stove that heats the building’s seven rooms. Like nearly all the buildings in Sandy Lake, with the exception of the nursing station and the school, there is no running water. Outside, at the back, a satellite dish silently watches the sky, receiving the TV Ontario signal that also carries Wawatay Radio Network from Sioux Lookout hundreds of kilometres to the south. Off to one side stands the small Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) transmitter tower that broadcasts the national English radio service as well as the community radio signal. At 100 watts, the transmitter more than covers the reserve. By agreement, the CBC signal is cut and replaced by the local station at certain times of the day. As with the other community radio stations in the Nishnawbe Aski territory, the language of the radio is aboriginal Cree or Oji-Cree. These are the tongues of daily life for most people.

A few hours by airplane to the south, in the town of Sioux Lookout, Wawatay Native Communications Society’s dozens of employees work in the Thomas Fiddler Memorial Building. The office and studio building is named in honour of their founder, Sandy Lake’s old chief. Wawatay serves the Nishnawbe Aski Nation territory with a television network, a trail radio system for hunters on the trapline, a telephone operator translation service and a newspaper, in addition to the Wawatay Radio Network (URN) carried on the community radio stations. Of all these communication services, the local community radio stations linked by the network are closest to the daily lives of the people. Nothing important happens in the communities without being channelled through their radio.

Wawatay got its start when the northern chiefs decided that something needed to be done about modern communications in their territory. Mike Hunter, a long time

Wawatay Board member from Peawanuck who works in Polar Bear Park on the west coast of Hudson Bay, explains:

I believe it was 1972. I was a Band Councillor then. There was a big meeting of the chiefs in Big Trout Lake. There was no communications of any kind in those days at all, period. The only thing Bell Telephone had in those days was the HF radio system. That's high frequency radio telephone communication system. And it was inadequate.

In most reserves, the only HF radio belonged to the private Hudson's Bay Company store. To get a message to a neighbouring reserve, a chief had to use the store's radio to send word south where it travelled as a telegram over an 1,100 mile route back north again.

So all the chiefs said, 'Let's have our own communication system. If we can get a license, we can have an HF radio communication system on our own frequency and we can communicate ourselves'. And that's when it started.

The Canadian government provided funding for an experimental project to establish an HF radio network between the reserves, and Wawatay Native Communications Society was formed to take over the operation of the network.

Wawatay Radio Network producer Bill Morris tells how Wawatay got it's name:

The one who named Wawatay was Mason Koostachin from Fort Severn. 'So everybody, what are we going to call this society?' Nobody volunteered. He said, 'Let's call it Wawatay.' Oh, that was nice. That word means northern lights. We look up in the clear skies of the northern part of Ontario every night. The whole sky will be covered with northern lights. And that's what wawatay means.

In its very early days, Wawatay started the publication of a newspaper. Following that, it turned its attention to the provision of a trail radio system which used portable high frequency radios. Wawatay owns and maintains a large number of these radios which are rented out during the season to trappers who are out on their traplines for extended periods of time. Trappers and their families use them to communicate with the base HF radios in the settlements and with other trappers. They are used in normal times to keep in touch with relatives and friends, to share the events of daily life and to share information about the weather and the movements of migratory animals. But the primary purpose of the trail radio system is for emergency use. It has been credited with saving many lives.

Soon after setting up the trail radio system, Wawatay set to work on community radio. The way had been paved by an experimental station set up in 1973 in Big Trout Lake, the largest community in the territory, with the help of government funding. As soon as other villages heard about it, they wanted a community radio station of their own. The idea of community radio immediately found immense popularity. Garnet Angeconeb explains:

CFTL in Big Trout Lake was the first community radio station ever in the Nishnawbe-Aski area. It took off. People really grasped on to the idea of how powerful community radio could be in a setting where communications are limited.

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At that time when there weren't any telephones in the community in people's homes, it acted as a communication tool within the village. People passed messages on. The community's leaders could use the airwaves to talk to people about concerns or issues. People were able to hear at once what was happening. It created dialogue within the community.

Since that time, the villages have acquired modern telephones as well as very limited television service. But the community radios established throughout the territory have maintained their vital role at the centre of community life.

In the nineteen seventies, the publicly owned Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) implemented a plan to provide its national radio service to all communities in Canada with 500 or more people. The experiment in Big Trout Lake had shown that there was a great popular demand for locally-originated radio in northern Ontario. The CBC agreed to allow community access to its repeater transmitters during certain hours each day. Very simple radio studios were installed for that purpose. However, there were only a few villages in Nishnawbe Aski territory that benefited. Sandy Lake was one of the few.

Most villages were too small to qualify for a CBC repeater and the community access radio station that it made possible. They had to start up community radios on their own with the help of Wawatay.

In spite of being one of the newest and smallest settlements, Muskrat Dam was the first village in the territory to start a community radio station independent of the CBC repeater/community access station system like the one set up in Sandy Lake. Wawatay Radio Network producer Bill Morris has family in Muskrat Dam, a community of about 200 established in 1966 on the site of a fishing camp. They wanted to maintain a more traditional way of life than in the village they came from. Bill helped his grandfather build cabins during summer breaks away from high school in a southern city.

Bill recalls what it was like at the station when he was the manager there, before becoming a network producer.

The Band Council came to see me and they asked me, 'Okay, would you be able to work at the radio?' And I said, 'Well, you know, if my health is good, sure, I could work or volunteer. I'll do my best'.

Well, I started working. There's no hydro (electricity) over there. Well, there's hydro, but you can't use the heaters. Cause all there is, is just a diesel (generator). It's only good for lights. How we heat the building is use wood stoves. There was really help doing it, especially in the winter time. I was going and get the wood. And they were going and chop the wood and heating up the whole building. They don't get paid for it. They do it volunteer.

And how did they get my money? They just had to do some fundraising. Like play bingo (on the radio). And make money off the dedications. When somebody wants to send one song, okay, they pay twenty-five cents. But on bingo I used to make, well, okay, about thirty dollars one night, or sometimes fifty for a week.

So anyways, with that fifty dollars I could maintain my radio. Like, I could buy gas. Maybe five gallons of gas. It was five dollars... about four-fifty, five dollars a gallon of gas. You have to go and get the wood maybe five miles

away from the community. So you use a skidoo. And a power saw too. So I need gas. I use that radio station money to buy gas to get wood. And also there's some calls I used to make. There's a telephone, a pay phone. Sometimes I phone up Wawatay or someplace.

In that time I knew some people from Winnipeg. I used to get the records from over in 'Peg, cause I knew some people. So I usually phone them up, 'Okay. Can you send me some records?' So, they send me, and I send 'em the money back.

I used to open my radio at about 6:30 in the morning, I guess. Well, actually, I'd go there 6:30 in the morning, or a little after six o'clock, especially in winter time, and start to heat up the building. And I'd go on air at seven o'clock in the morning. That's when the people want that. They want to open the radio from seven to nine. They want it opened early in the morning, because the kids are going to school. So I usually tell them, 'O.K., you guys. Kids should get ready. It's almost nine o'clock. It's really cold.' And at nine o'clock, shut the radio off. Then open the radio at 11 o'clock until one in the afternoon. I usually get the volunteers from twelve to one. I open again at four o'clock in the afternoon until about ten o'clock. I usually get volunteers in the evenings. Maybe I'll be going on there sometimes one hour or two hours in the evening.

The volunteers have their own records. Everybody buys his own records. They bring their own type of music they want, although we have records at the station. But they have their own records too. They bring them up and they play their own music, and also they come down here and they tell stories too. And also elders. They'd come over here and go on.

Or they take messages. Somebody will call from outside the community so they take messages there because there's a telephone there. So every time somebody calls from outside the community, and they says, 'Here's a message to a certain person...' You're supposed to call to Round Lake, maybe Bearskin Lake or Sachigo. Or to Kasabonika or to Big Trout Lake. See, people calls in, especially in the evenings.

We have a Board of Directors and our directors, they're the ones who set the directions to me. We have about seven directors. And they're the ones who give the directions – what I have to do -and set up a schedule.

The kids... they come in on the four to five. And they play rock music. Mostly the kids are from nine years old, till fourteen. But I usually supervise with them and I teach them how to operate the radio. And then five to six, probably somebody'll be coming on. Six to seven, I usually get somebody who has the trail radio at home – HF radios. That person, he talks to the other communities. And that's how we get news from outside our community. That person who has the HF radio will be based at home. He comes on at six o'clock and tells, 'Okay. This is what they said over in the other place...' So that's how we get the stories from outside the community. This is the time before Wawatay Radio Network was in, see.

In the night time I used to listen to the Winnipeg (English language) station. What I used to do Just before I go to the radio, I'd record the news. I knew wheels going on. So, I knew who was playing hockey in Sioux. I record

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that and then I write it up (in Cree). Then I'd go on the radio, 'Okay. This is what's happening. This is what's happening in Winnipeg.'

Even the weather. I'd get the weather from Winnipeg. Because Winnipeg's not too far from Muskrat Dam. Well, actually, I don't know how far it is, but... Like if they have really a rough weather over there, we get that weather just in 24 hours. That's how long it travels. So I usually predict the weather too. I usually used to talk about Mr. Trudeau at that time, when he was the Prime Minister. And I say, 'Gee, it's cold here, and now Mr. Trudeau's way down in the south in the Caribbean Islands. He's on holidays. And there we are here. It's cold, you know.' They used to like it when I used to do that.

Wawatay in Sioux Lookout helped Muskrat Dam get the equipment for the radio station and sent a technician in to install it. The community raised the \$2,000 to pay for it. Wawatay's search for the right equipment led them to a small hand made FM transmitter. Wawatay technician George Daigle picks up the story:

It was designed by E.E. Stevens in Ottawa. He was an electronic engineer. He started building these little transmitters for FM radios. They were three quarters of a watt, which was plenty for a little community. It was just fantastic – FM Radio. It was perfect. He made the antenna out of copper tubing water pipes.

Steven's been making these transmitters now for, I don't know, twelve years. He sends them all over. You'll probably see some down in South America. They're all over the place.

They're unique. There's no tuning on them. You just turn it up until it starts to distort. Crank her back a little bit, and that's it. That's your tuning. That's all there is to it. It's got a three position switch for the meter. You can tell if your antenna's no good. It tells you if there's been damage. You can monitor the signal going into your transmitter. And the one going out, and the one reflected back. It tells you everything you need to know about the antenna. You just click, click, click everything works fine and that's it. That's all there is to your transmitter.

Wawatay ordered 25, and in 1977 went up to Muskrat Dam to install the first one in defiance of the CRTC, Canada's broadcasting regulatory agency. Former Wawatay Executive Director Garnet Angeconeb puts it this way:

At first we had some problems dealing with government regulations and so on with using this transmitter in that it didn't meet government specifications. Therefore the CRTC wouldn't license these things. But we went ahead and used them anyway, simply because it was the right thing to do. I mean everything looked logical up north. There weren't any other frequencies to interrupt or to interfere with. So it was just right. We went ahead and used them anyway and in Muskrat Dam that transmitter proved to be really useful.

Eventually the CRTC relented and gave Wawatay licenses for all 25 transmitters. One by one, the communities of the north raised the money to purchase the equipment and Wawatay flew in a technician to install them. George Daigle tells how it's done:

Jeez, it's cold waitin' for a wood stove to get warmed up. One community I went to, this was a while ago... it's about eight years ago, I guess. They had no place for me to sleep – nowhere. They put me in this wood shack. I had to stay

there overnight. It was in the fall. It was snowing a bit. That was quite a night, that one. They had a little wood stove in the corner, but you could see right through the walls. Snow would come in. I had to sleep on top of a pile of wood. Keep away from the ground, because it was snowing out. That was quite something. That's the roughest I've ever seen up there.

Sometimes you stay in a house that somebody has given to the Band. The Band built them a new house and moved them over there. So they just kept this one house for visitors. They have no running water. They got no lights. All they got is a bed and sometimes it's only a foam on top of a plywood. We never get blankets. You don't get bedding. You just get a bed. You bring your own sleeping bag. Most of them, there's no heat in there. They'll supply you with wood. They'll light the fire and they'll bring you water. They don't have restaurants there, so you got to bring all your grub.

I go in there, I want to stay a week. Because I don't know what's going to go wrong.

It takes a day to find your room, get organised, get people up there, find where the radio station's gonna be installed, bring the equipment there. It's hard to get around cause there's no vehicles. So you got to lug everything. It takes awhile to get around. So I usually chuck off the first day.

Next day, you install the radio station. It don't take so long. It doesn't take you long to hook up that kind of equipment. In about half a day -you're done.

The latest stations, we even put the transmitter up on the top of the TVO (TV Ontario) tower. They allowed us to put it on theirs. So all I really have to do is shimmy up the tower, stick a pipe in there, clamp the antenna on it and put a couple of clamps on the tower and come back down. And that's it! You just screw it into the transmitter. No tuning, no nothing. There it goes. On the air. It's as fast as that.

And then we train everybody .. how everything works. How to shake it down. And they're on their own. Kenina (Kakekayash, the Wawatay Radio Network manager), usually she'll do the paper work for licenses.

And then I'll stay there for a couple of days. Go look at the HF radio, and do a little work on that, maybe. Fix up the antenna. Change the antenna. Just to stick around the community. Not go far. They'll come back about a day or two later and ask questions. Not the same day. I'd rather just stand back and watch. They won't ask any questions. Finally, when they know that we're about ready to leave, then everybody's there and asking questions. So I've learned my lesson. I stay there for a couple or three days, and eventually, when they get to run it more and more, then they start asking questions. 'How do you operate this, now?' 'And then you can start telling them.

And if they have problems, you're there, you know? After they start, there's always something that could go wrong, so you give it a few days, let them run into the problems.

Then you show them: 'You do this wrong, you do this right'. You go back then and get away from there, and listen again. I bring my own radio and listen to 'em at home. And, sure enough, it don't take 'em long. They're right

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in there, and away they go. Then they're fine. They're mobile. And then from there they grow.

If they didn't have a TVO tower, we go in the bush, cut a pole from a tree. You come in there and plant it. Dig a hole, nail the antenna on top of it, and then put up the pole. We always brought extra because if we drop that pole, so much for the antenna! I've done that a few times. I always bring two. Cause we have a bunch of antennas. We have 'em spare because lightening hits 'em and rips 'em apart.

This one community there, I remember, there must have been about, I don't know, fifty people around watching me working all this time. And as soon as I said, 'Well, okay, this is it, she's on the air!'... Zoom. Everybody disappeared. As soon as I said that the radio station was on the air. They were gone. It was really funny. They all went home to listen to their radios, I guess. They were already prepared. They had an FM radio. All the time that I worked there, installing the radio station, there was crowds watching from the window. They was watching from the windows everywhere. It was quite a feeling, to be bringing something that they never had before, something that they really wanted.

According to Garnet Angeconeb,

Community radio in an Indian community in the Nishnawbe Aski Nation is part of the overall infrastructure the same way as roads in a municipality in the south. Community radio is different in the isolated north as opposed to radio in southern communities. There is no other way of getting local information exchange within the community without the radio station. In the north it's the only radio station that people can tune into locally. Therefore, it becomes an intricate part of the community.

The James Fiddler Memorial Radio Station in Sandy Lake is an example. The station is under the direction of the Wendomowin (To Tell the People) Communications Society whose president is Abel Fiddler. He says that one of the most important things about the radio is "getting word to the people."

We're really close in the community, eh? Not like white people. We really care about each other. Like if there is an emergency at the nursing station, a whole bunch of people go there. In case of emergency in the southern areas, they don't care. Here everybody goes.

If somebody is lost in the bush, people carry portable radios with batteries. And like if anybody is found, and a whole bunch of people are in the bush [searching], they listen to the radio all the time and they know right away the person has been found and the searchers come back.

Menashi Meekis is a young man who took on the job of managing Sandy Lake's radio station, a difficult task because of the chronic shortage of money. He describes another way in which the station is integral to keeping the community in touch with itself.

Most people are related here. If somebody dies, one of the band councillors calls me up and we have to go on the air and I come. Sometimes we stay open all night when someone dies. I have to get volunteers. Sometimes I have to show up at four or five [in the morning]. We play gospel music until everyone knows. If someone is watching TV, he goes to the radio and opens his radio.

We have a pirate TV dish and they turn it off. If they see the picture go off, they would wonder and they turn the radio on. During the time the councillors would be driving around telling the relatives to open the radio and to tell them what happened. After everybody knows, then the Band comes in and comes on the air to tell the people. That's why we have to open early so people can open their radios before the Sandy Lake Band comes on to tell them what happened. So we're pretty close.

The radio station is integral to the rhythm of daily life. Music lifts the spirits of all ages, each having their own time during the day. After school hours for the young, mid-morning for the elders, Sunday afternoon for the religious. All day long the music is punctuated by the all important phoned-in messages that are repeated several times, at the end of songs. An elderly widow calls to say that one of her grandsons should come to chop firewood for her. There is no gas for sale today at one place, but there is at the other. The plane from Sioux Lookout has arrived. Someone's cousins are driving in tonight on the ice road from Weagamow but he has to meet them half way at midnight with a can of gas because they don't have enough to make it. Jennifer's mother is looking for her. Would whoever took Bill's grey suitcase at the air strip please return it. The nursing station will have a visiting doctor today and the following people have appointments. The medicines for the health centre came up on the plane today and people waiting can pick them up now.

The school, the police, the drug and alcohol commission, the recreation clubs, the firehall, the women's baseball team, all the several churches each have their altered regular hour. Sometimes they have serious matters to discuss, other times they just chat and play music to help everyone's day along while the important messages are phoned in and announced. Other hours are given to members of the community, sometimes in pairs, who like to come and play their favourite music for the general amusement of Sandy Lake.

And then there is the indispensable radio bingo every Thursday night. People come into the station throughout the day to buy their cards for the evening's game. Board members drive around during the day selling cards to people who can't get to the station. It's a major form of entertainment, and it raises most of the money for the station. The bingo master calls out the numbers over the radio, and the winner calls in when he or she has a bingo. The money raised pays the electricity, phone and gas bills and other costs. It also goes towards the occasional airplane ticket for the local hockey team to go to the Northern Tribes playoff in Sioux Lookout, or for a band member to go to a relative's funeral in another village.

The winners come down to the station to get their cash, and they often spend a good portion of it right then and there on Nevada tickets. Nevada tickets are like scratch and win lottery cards, except that they have to be torn open to see if you have a winner. You get your cash on the spot if you do. It's not unusual to see a group of men standing around the trash barrel near the front door of the station deftly flipping open a handful of Nevada tickets while they talk over the day's events. By Band Council order, the radio station has the monopoly of this popular way to try your luck. The proceeds help keep the station on the air.

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The Wawatay Radio Network is heard a few hours a day in the Nishnawbe Aski Nation villages with a community radio station. The broadcasts are uplinked live from Wawatay's Sioux Lookout offices piggybacked with TV Ontario's satellite signal. Wawatay has been extremely adept over the years at dealing with southern institutions such as TV Ontario, the Ontario public educational television network. TV Ontario was setting up a satellite receiving dish in each village to get their service into the remote areas of northern Ontario. Wawatay succeeded in getting TV Ontario to squeeze its radio network signal onto the satellite and to set up a simple switching system to feed the signal into the community radio transmitters when Wawatay is broadcasting.

Kenina Kakekayash from the Round Lake reserve manages the radio network. She started with Wawatay as an interpreter for their telephone translation service. The service provides interpretation between northern callers and telephone company operators. Kenina was later given the responsibility of travelling from village to village to talk to the native leaders about the idea of setting up the radio network. She recalls the excitement of those times.

We had to meet the band leaders, informing them, finding out what they thought about it and if they were going to support that thing. They did. Everybody was excited. They were so happy. 'It's about time that we're gonna put the network together. We're go hear the news.' I did a lot of travelling. At first it was really hard because of the technology words. You have to say them in our native language. As time went by, it became easier.

The network provided even more impetus for the villages that didn't have their own community radio station to get one set up. They couldn't be part of the network without a local station. Kenina worked with many communities helping them get on the air. But there are still communities without a station. Executive Director Lawrence Martin wants to see them all in the network. He thinks this will provide a new challenge for Wawatay: "It's gonna be interesting because they're more in the southern part. Their language is not as strong as the ones up here." However, Wawatay faced a serious setback to its plans to complete coverage of the territory, when the Canadian government made deep cuts to funding for native communications societies in 1990.

WRN broadcasts 95% of its daily programming in both languages spoken in the Nishnawbe Aski Nation, Cree and Oji-Cree. Several northern producers based in the communities put together stories that Sioux Lookout and Moose Factory network staff use in combination with their own material. Sioux Lookout produces the Oji-Cree programmes and Moose Factory on the western shore of Hudson Bay produces the Coastal Cree programmes. Programmes focus on international, national, and regional news, culture and traditions, children and youth, and important issues such as native self-government, the education system, and the extremely high suicide rate among the young. Weather, birthdays and sports (hockey is played with a passion in the north) are not forgotten.

Garnet Angecone believes that WRN helps the people of the Nishnawbe Aski Nation understand the forces of the outside world that affect them.

I see an educational process happening here. You know, not only do they learn about Indian issues, but they also learn about the political process, whether it's provincial politics, whether it's federal politics. They begin to understand why

things are the way they are. For example, Indian people, like anywhere else in the world, use energy. They use fuel. They use gasoline to run their machines, skidoos or outboard, what have you. And the way they get their gasoline in the north is it's flown in by aircraft. That's the only means of transporting fuel to most communities. And the cost of gasoline is extremely high in the north. And every time the prices go up, they just blame either the airlines or the local store. Of course the airlines and the local stores have to make their profit as well. But there are other factors as to why the price of gasoline goes up. The politics in Alberta could affect the prices of gasoline, for example. The politics in the Middle East can affect the prices of gasoline. And so what you begin to see then is that, hey, these things aren't just happening locally. They're happening in other parts of the country. And in other parts of the world. So what you begin to see is Indian people not only taking an interest in what is happening locally, or regionally, they're beginning to take an interest in what's happening nationally. And even beyond that, internationally.

Of the 53 aboriginal languages still spoken in Canada, only a few are considered by Canadian officials to have any chance of survival. Cree is one of the few. The native people of northern Ontario consider that their community radios are crucial to the survival of their language. Garnet Angeconeb explains.

The guiding principle behind all the community radio movement is based on language. The success story had one focus and that is language and culture. The programming is in the language of the people. When people listen to the Wawatay Radio Network the elders are able to relate to what is happening as well as the young people. Hopefully through the radio network people are able to strengthen their language, their culture and their identity. And that's really important. Many people at Wawatay have always said that it is important for aboriginal people to try and keep their language. I'm a firm believer in that. If aboriginal people lose their language, they don't have any other place to go to regain it, or their culture for that matter. It's not like a person living in Canada who is of Italian background. They could always go back to their mother country to regain their language and their culture. But here in Canada, for the aboriginal people, this is the motherland of the culture, this is the homeland of the aboriginal languages, and if they're lost, they're lost and gone forever. There is no other place to go. So through Wawatay our argument has always been that we have to do everything possible to strengthen our languages and keep them alive.

People are getting satellite dishes to beam in TV, and when you look at the television set in the living room in a northern community, the programming's really irrelevant. You see a little kid rhyming lines off a sitcom – Rambo movies. And the challenge to keep our language alive becomes real. It's not a fantasy. The most frustrating part of my job when I was Executive Director of Wawatay was trying to convince decision makers in places like Ottawa or Toronto that northern Ontario has a unique lifestyle. The Indian communities are unique up there. They're very rich people. They may not be rich in terms of financial resources or anything like that, but they are rich in terms of their culture and their language. And we have to preserve that.

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Note: The conversations upon which this story is based took place mainly in 1989. A year later, Canadian government financial contributions to the aboriginal communications organisations that provide a broadcast or printed voice for native people were drastically cut back in a move that seems designed to mute those voices. Twenty one such groups throughout Canada have cut staff, reduced operations or gone out of existence. Wawatay's ability to provide technical maintenance for the community radio stations and trail radios of Nishnawbe Aski is being severely tested, as is the network itself.

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