Biigtigong Nishnaabeg

"Reclaiming Our Name"

Biigtigong Nishnaabeg Chief and Council
September 14, 2015
On Tuesday, September 8, 2015, a ceremony was conducted to acknowledge and celebrate the traditional name of our community. A band council resolution was signed officially changing our name from The Ojibways of the Pic River First Nation to Biigtigong Nishnaabeg.

Why the name “Biigtigong?”

It comes from our very own Ancestors and Elders:
Without question, Biigtigong is the traditional name of our community, if we rely on the words of our ancestors and elders. Our great-grandparents, grandparents and some of our parents, and others refer to our community by its traditional name. Our name, Biigtigong, is held in our stories either passed on orally or written down, in the audio of our speakers and elders, and in the living experiences of many of us here today. Biigtigong still remains in the hearts and spirit of many of our community members today, who grew up with this name.

From Academic Research:
Over the years, we have been conducting research to support our Aboriginal Title Claim. This research is extensive and completed by experts in specific fields (i.e. genealogy, social and cultural anthropology). Again, there is clear evidence that Biigtigong is our traditional name. Additionally, evidence also shows that many of our surnames and place names were changed. This research is Litigation Privileged at this time and therefore we cannot share the details. Extensive research has been done and will be utilized when it becomes available for the public. Part of this research also included elder testimonies from the community. The testimonies from these elders also acknowledge the name Biigtigong.

Outside the Community:
Some elders from Long Lake, Pic Mobert, Ginoogaming, Whitesand, Gull Bay, and other area First Nations still refer to our community as Biigtigong. Many of them share a common history with us and have stories that connect us as a Nation.
Discussion regarding our name has been an on-going process. Here are some formal events that provided Council with the direction to change the name.

Our elders, past and current, acknowledge Biigtigong is the traditional name of the community. For example, when our land claim was filed in Court in the 1980’s, the elders at the time (the generation of Alphose, Camille, Duncan, Benny, Clara, Mathilda, Annie), instructed the Council to use our traditional name. Our land claim was filed using the name Biigtigong (it was spelled as “Begetikong“). Our elders from the 1959 project reference our traditional name; there is no reference to Pic River First Nation or Pic 50 Heron Bay (we have audio and written documentation). Our elders today refer to our home as Biigtigong.

In 2006, Chief and the Council commissioned a comprehensive community survey to study the status of Nishnaabemwin, solicit membership beliefs and values towards the language and obtain direction for the development of a language and culture revitalization plan. This was a house-to-house survey that was designed to capture the thoughts of all adult members in the community. The return rate of surveys was high. Part of this survey asked the question “Should the community name be changed to our traditional name (Biigtigong)?” 100% of the responses supported the name change. The survey results were distributed to each household and were posted on picriver.com up until last year.

2014 Constitution Consultation Process: The membership at our annual pow-wow in 2014 was presented with a survey regarding the Constitution. Cindy Fisher and the Committee set up a booth & distributed information on the Constitution process and conducted a survey. Included in this survey was a question asking the community if we should change our name to Biigtigong? The results indicated support to make the name change.

Community Strategic Planning Sessions (January 2013 & April 2014)
Two major strategic planning events were held involving the community, staff and Council. One area looked at was reclamation and revitalization of our traditional culture, language and practices. The goal was to ensure our operations and strategies in all areas (i.e. education, health, economic development, governance, etc.) were aligned with our Nishnaabe culture. The idea to reclaim our traditional name was identified and supported as one of the strategies to assert who we are as a people.

Story Vault Sessions: This initiative was established to provide a forum for community members, specifically our elders, to gather to share traditional knowledge and stories from our community. Throughout the past couple of years, various sessions have been held. The stories shared here and the discussions that took place centered on reclaiming our identity. Constant reference to the name Biigtigong was shared.
The Spelling

The simple fact is we did not know how to spell our name and as a result we see many versions of the spelling of our name. The inconsistent spelling of our name is seen in court motions filed in the 1980’s, correspondence, policy, school programs, our community signs and in personal use. We have seen various versions of the spelling - Begetekong, Beegtigong, Begetegong and so forth.

Here’s a short story involving our respected elder Lambert Nabigon and our name. Lambert approached us about making name signs for the entrances to the community and for the community hall. All the signs were going to read just our legal name “Ojibways of the Pic River First Nation.” However, Lambert insisted the signs include our traditional name Biigtigong (Begetekong), especially the community hall signs. Lambert believed it was important for our children to see and connect with our traditional name Biigtigong (Begetekong) as they walked into the community hall. He believed it was important for us to know we have a traditional name. Discussion occurred regarding the spelling and the fact we did not have any idea on how to spell it. So we used the English writing system to spell our name, knowing we were probably misspelling it. However, correct spelling was not the focus; instilling pride, honoring our traditional ways and reclaiming our identity, as Nishnaabeg, was Lambert’s dream.

At the time, we were not aware that a writing system specifically designed for Nishnaabemwin already existed. If we did, we would have correctly spelled it back then but we were not aware of this information. Perhaps the next time we walk into our community hall, we can take a second and say Miigwech Lambert and think about this story.

Back to today’s spelling. We acknowledged that we did not know how to spell our name and this was a problem that needed to be addressed. Since there is already an accepted writing system for Nishnaabemwin, we decided to adopt this method. All linguists who study Nishnaabe languages (Ojibway, Odawa) use this method of writing, known as the “Double Vowel”.

Our traditional name Biigtigong is now spelled according to the standardized writing system used across Nishnaabe territory and the academic world.

The Literal Meaning

How to determine the literal meaning of words comes from the science and study of Linguistics. All languages in the world are made up of morphemes. Morphemes are like Lego blocks. All words from all languages can be broken down into their Legos - their morphemes. These Legos inside a word are what each word is built with. So, morphemes in the simplest definition are just the smallest meaningful unit in the grammar of a language.

Considerable research has been done in documenting various dialects of Nishnaabemwin (Rhodes, Barraga, Nichols, Ningewance, Corbiere, Valentine). Although, there are differences within each dialect, there are many parts that are the same across all Nishnaabemwin dialects. One of these common parts is the morphemes that make up the words. Morphemes do not generally change meaning across dialects. Sometimes dialects have additional morphemes. Morphemes provide the basis to determine the break down and literal meaning of words. This is based on science and linguistics.

In addition to the extensive work done by others in the field of Nishnaabemwin, we used the work completed for our Biigtigong Dictionary to assist us in finding out the literal meaning of our name. Council had access to a database that contained approximately 20,000 words in our dialect of Nishnaabemwin. This database was compiled in conjunction with our elders, existing work throughout Nishnaabe country, and audio recordings and written material left by our ancestors. Our dictionary documents the Biigtigong Nishnaabe words, standard definitions, and is spelled according to the rules of the Double Vowel writing system.

Utilizing the standardized writing system, breaking the word into its morphemes and accessing Nishnaabe dictionaries, including our database, allowed us to determine the literal meaning of our traditional name.
Biigtigong can be broken down into 3 morphemes. It cannot be broken down any further. These three morphemes are: “biig”, “tig”, and “ong”.

“biig” – There are dozens of words in the Nishnaabe language and in our Dictionary that contain the morpheme “biig”. The English language interpretation of this morpheme references the following concepts: tearing, breaking, ripping, crumbling, eroding, cutting-up, wearing down and churning.

“tig” – refers to a characteristic of a river, an attribute of a river, a state of a river.

“ong” – this is called a “locative ending” and it indicates location. It is used to express the following concepts: at, place of, in, on.

Based on a morphological and linguistic analysis, an English translation of our traditional name Biigtigong, can be interpreted as:

“place of the river that erodes.”

Nishnaabeg

We did not want to use the colonial term given to us “Ojibways, Ojibwas, Ojibwes”. We are Nishnaabeg.

Our dialect is a vowel dropping dialect, unlike full- vowel Ojibwe (mostly in the Western & South-western parts of Nishnaabe territory). Most full-vowel communities use the following spelling: Anishinaabe (singular) and Anishinaabeg (plural). For us, here is the spelling: Nishnaabe (singular) and Nishnaabeg (plural).

Reclaiming Our Identity, Asserting Sovereignty

Our name change is an assertion of our Sovereignty. It is about reclaiming our identity and defining who we are as a people. Our name, Biigtigong perhaps could be a collective force that connects us to our history, to our ancestors, to our land, to our relations and to the generations to come.
We have many stories relating to the Biigtig (Pic River). Some stories have been documented and others have been passed on through oral tradition. The river plays a very significant role in our history and continues to do so. The social meanings attached to the river and this place we call home are so very important. Wonderful memories that start with “My Shommy told me …” or “I remember …” connect us as families and as a community. These stories resonate within the very essence of our beings; they keep us attached to our ancestors, our Nishnaabeg ways and our land. Many of our stories are disappearing and are not being sought out by our young. Each of us has elders in the family and access to elders in the community. With a bit of tobacco and time, we all can all have knowledge of our stories and our past. And, we can simply share our stories at home.

Here are some snapshots of some stories relating to Biigtig:

- It is the source of life for our people.
- Descriptions of the nature of the river.
- References to its role as a Highway.
- The Cedar trees that hover over the river.
- Deadhead logs and sunken trees at the floor of the river.
- Water spirits.
- Offerings made to the spirits.
- New life – birthing our children.
- Putting away our dead.
- References to the color of the water & the muddying of the water.
- Stories of eroding riverbanks.
- Stories of ice break up.
- Stories of the strong current.
- Stories of the tilling of the river floor.

Some celebrations highlighting our name:

- 1st Community Sign: Health Centre
- 1st Educational Pamphlet: Children’s Oral Health
- 1st correspondence: Myra’s profile of her dad – she uses “Biigtigong”
- 1st website: Biigtigong/language.com (release date: September 16, 2015)
- 1st legal document: Constitution Name (Biigtigong)

We understand that it will take some time to make the changes, for example, legal documents, policies, logos, signs etc. This will be done over time and eventually everything will be changed over. We hope our name change and the information contained in this newsletter, brings celebration, instills hope and pride and connects us as a community.

Band Council Resolution

Whereas: our Ancestors have always referred to our Community as BIIGTIGONG and we acknowledge our responsibility to honour and respect those who have gone before us; and

Whereas: the Community acknowledges BIIGTIGONG as the traditional name of our community; and

Whereas: the Community desires to restore our Community’s traditional Nishnaabe name as a step to reclaiming our sovereign independence as a Nishnaabe Nation.

Therefore be it resolved that: the community known as the OJIBWAYS OF THE PIC RIVER FIRST NATION shall forthwith be renamed and referred to as BIIGTIGONG NISHNAABEG, and that all future correspondence, agreements and other documentation referring to the community, addressed either to or from the First Nation be styled with the traditional name for the community, BIIGTIGONG NISHNAABEG