The annual Algonquian Conference was spawned during the 1960s, that time of affluence, optimism and turmoil that generated intellectual growth in academe. Caught up in the tide, the National Museum of Canada hosted no less than four major anthropological conferences between 1963 and 1966 (Museums 1963, Algonquian Linguistics 1964, Band Organization 1965, and Cultural Ecology 1966). The success of these meetings combined with the knowledge that a small but productive conference on Iroquois studies organized by William N. Fenton was held each fall in New York State inspired Gordon Day of the National Museum of Man to propose a similar meeting on Algonquian studies. Thus, during the spring and summer of 1968, notices were sent out to scholars with a known interest in Algonquians, and the arrangements were completed with the help of Don DeBlois and James V. Wright. The enthusiasm expressed by most respondents was the go-ahead signal.

In line with Day’s penchant for rustic surroundings, the meeting was held at Hôtel-sur-le-Lac, St-Pierre-de-Wakefield, Québec, approximately 50 kilometers north of Ottawa. Opening remarks were delivered by Charles Mackenzie, Coordinator of Museums. The first session, held on Friday evening, was chaired by James G.E. Smith,
then of the National Museum of Man. The interdisciplinary nature of the conference is reflected in that session. The first paper was by an ethnologist (Honigman — read by another person since he couldn’t attend), the second by a linguist (Goddard), the third by an archaeologist (Sanger), and the fourth by a historian (Barbour). Of the approximately 65 persons in attendance, 22 delivered papers. Of these 14 would classify as ethnology, ethnohistory or history, 5 as linguistics, and 3 as archaeology. The programme was reasonably well balanced. Judging by comments made at the time, and later letters to the senior author, the meeting received a very positive response, one that fueled his original hope that it would become an annual affair. It almost didn’t.

History of the Algonquian Conference Since 1968

Unlike the manner in which the Iroquois Conference was run, it was never Day’s intention that the conference be hosted annually by the Museum or that he become permanent organizer. As he wrote to Evelyn Todd (18 December 1968) “We are not a permanent committee for the Algonquian Conference. There is none. We were merely the instigators of it.” He, and apparently most of the participants then and since have preferred to retain a relatively unstructured and democratic decision-making forum in regard to the whens, wheres and whos of future meetings and programmes. Thus, just as in the case of band type societies studied by many if not most of the conference contributors, one of the conference’s greatest strengths has been non-authoritarian flexibility. But also, just as in the case of bands, the absence of formal structures empowered to take actions to ensure that tasks get done has created problems in the past. For example, when plans to hold the second conference at the University of Montréal in 1969 fell through, had John Hewson of Memorial University not volunteered at the last moment to act as host, there probably would have been no meeting. As it turned out, distance, late rescheduling and an August date reduced the contributions to 13. Again, following the 1971 meeting, two different offers were withdrawn during the spring of 1972, one from the University of Toronto because of the American Anthropological Association meeting to be held there, and a backup offer from Laval University. James Clifton and Ronald Klimek of the University of Wisconsin at Green Bay
agreed to host the next (5th) conference, but only if it could be held in the spring because fall hotel arrangements evidently competed with the Green Bay Packer schedule. While this western meeting picked up new recruits, those at the meeting concurred that a fall conference was preferable.

In the late summer of 1970 a joint Algonquian-Iroquois Conference was hosted by Trent University. Arrangements for this meeting had been negotiated as early as December 1968. Following the almost disastrous 1969 meeting, the decision to host a joint conference had fortunate consequences. The surroundings were pleasant, attendance was high, and socially it was quite a success. However, for whatever reason, no further attempts have been made to host similar joint meetings, possibly because only 25% of the papers crossed ethnic specialty lines.

Five meetings have been held in the United States (Massachusetts 2, Wisconsin, Michigan and Minnesota 1 each) and the remainder in eastern Canada. Attendance has fluctuated from a low of about 15 persons at the second meeting to well over 100. The best attended meetings have been in the larger cities of Québec and Ontario, while meetings held west of southern Ontario in the United States have been poorly attended. Nevertheless, since the mid 1970s, with one exception, both attendance and conference participation have slowly but steadily risen. While such factors as location, costs, and dates affect attendance, these appear to be having less impact than during the early halting years. With size the meetings appear to have gained some stability.

Types and Categories of Papers

From the beginning it was intended that the Algonquian Conference be interdisciplinary. There were to be no restrictions on who might participate, and, indeed, scholars from diverse academic backgrounds were encouraged to do so. However, without some attempt to solicit certain kinds of papers while limiting the numbers of others, a practice antithetical to the egalitarian and democratic values of our "band", imbalances could, and did, become a reality. Indeed, even before the first meeting was held, one noted scholar expressed his concern that history was not represented on the programme — he apparently overlooked Barbour's paper — and inquired whether
his contribution would be of interest to a gathering of anthropologists. General interest in historical issues by most anthropologists combined with the gradual attraction of more historians soon dispelled such fears. The real problem has been achieving some balance in subdisciplinary coverage within the field of anthropology.

To many the papers seem to fall into two rather unrelated categories — linguistics and everything else. Papers that can be classified as history, ethnology or education are generally comprehensible to everybody, archaeology contributions somewhat less so, but many linguistic papers are so narrowly focused that they are unintelligible or of little interest except to other linguists. One historian friend summed up this view as early as 1968 when he remarked, “As for linguistics, it might charitably be called a foreign language to me” (Francis Jennings, letter of 6 April 1968).

But it has not simply been that some linguists have failed to communicate the broader significance of their findings to the uninitiated. In addition, the linguists have been accused by some of attempting to commandeer the meetings. A casual glance at the disproportionately large number of linguistic papers listed on the programme for some years could easily lead one to this happily false conclusion. Nevertheless, the impression was established as early as the second meeting when, as chance had it, there were 9 papers by linguists as compared with 3 by archaeologists and 2 by ethnologists, and 5 of the linguists were reporting on Ojibwa.

The 1978 to 1980 conferences were particularly overrepresented by linguistic papers or, if one is a linguist, underrepresented by other types of papers. Eighteen of 33 papers were classified as linguistic in 1978, 21 of 37 in 1979, and 13 of 19 in 1980. While it would be wrong to assume that all of these papers were so technical as to be of no interest to a general audience, many indeed were. Nevertheless, in our opinion, it should not be expected that linguists abandon discussion of their specialized methods, terminology and data simply to appease the uneducated. However, to avoid parochialism, linguists should make clear the broader significance of their findings following their technical analysis. One of us, in a general letter to Algonquiansts in response to complaints, written and verbal, from non-linguists following the 1978 meeting stressed that because the conference “was conceived as, and has always aimed at being, an interdisciplinary conference,” participants “should prepare their pre-
sentation with the mixed audience in mind. If a subject demands
the theory and technical language of a given discipline, the speaker
should sum up in plain English making clear to non-specialists the
point of the paper and its contribution.”

While there have been complaints about too many linguistic pa-
pers, few have expressed concern that archaeological papers have
dwindled to few or none over the past few years. Since its inception
there have been only 17 papers that would qualify as archaeology,
and several of these contained considerable historical data. This is
too bad since many of these papers were quite controversial or inter-
esting. How could one forget Dean Snow’s 1975 paper and slide show
of obscene petroglyphs! It is of interest to note that the 1981 Annual
Conference of the University of Calgary Archaeology Association,
the theme of which was “Approaches to Algonquian Archaeology,”
brought together more scholars interested in Algonquian prehistory
than have participated in all the Algonquian Conferences combined.

Physical anthropology has gone almost unrepresented. To our
knowledge, the two papers by Ted Steegman (1971, 1975), focused
on human adaptation to Subarctic conditions in northern Ontario,
are all that exist.

Treatment of Tribal Groups

The best represented and probably the most intensively researched
groups have been the Ojibwa and Cree. The Cree have been the
subject of some 49 papers, one third of which were linguistic papers,
while the Ojibwa have been the subject of 44 papers, over two-thirds
of which were linguistic papers. The addition of the Ottawa and
Algonquin would increase the Ojibwa total to 59 papers. In order
to arrive at these totals, a rather arbitrary distinction had to be
made between such groups as Cree and Ojibwa and between Cree
and Montagnais, especially where such labels are used interchange-
ably or where ethnic lines are blurred. The Montagnais-Naskapi pa-
pers divide about equally between linguistic and non-linguistic topics
and total 22. Next in importance were the Wabanaki (24 papers),
Micmac (18 papers), and other New England groups (20 papers).
Atlantic seaboard peoples south of New England receive relatively
scant attention, although there are 8 papers on the Delaware and
3 on the Powhatan. It should be added that many of the general
papers that focus on issues or themes include several groups. Thus, our figure would alter depending upon how papers are classified.

Approximately 95% of all papers delivered at the meetings deal with Algonquians in the Northeast/eastern Subarctic. Except for the Ojibwa, moreover, there are less than a dozen papers on Central Great Lakes Algonquians (Potawatomi, Kickapoo-Meskwakie and Shawnee), most by linguists. Plains Algonquians, excluding Plains Cree and Plains Ojibwa, are the focus of about a dozen papers, again mostly by linguists. The only non-linguistic paper is on the Blackfoot. Finally, 3 papers have been delivered on the Yurok and Wiyot of California, the only ethnographic paper being given by Arnold Pilling at the 1970 meeting.

Perhaps the better coverage of western Algonquians by linguists may be explained by the large number of linguistic papers and/or greater concern for comparative research required to establish phylogenetic relationships and proto-Algonquian forms. To many linguists, how Indians speak may be more important than where they reside. Non-linguists who reside outside the Northeast may be discouraged from participating by higher travel costs and/or a belief that their findings would be better received elsewhere.

Publications

During the early years there was no attempt to publish conference papers as a package. In 1971 following the meeting at Big Moose, New York, the linguistic papers were submitted to Studies in Linguistics whose editor, George L. Trager, published them in a special issue (Vol. 23:1-123, 1973). The papers of the Sixth Algonquian Conference were the first edited by William Cowan and published by the National Museum of Man Mercury Series, Canadian Ethnology Service paper No. 23, 1975. Each year since, Cowan has edited the papers, which have been published by Carleton University. Soft cover volumes of 200 to 300 pages photographically reproduced from typed text were produced until 1981. Beginning with the papers of the Thirteenth Conference (published in 1982) typesetting equipment has been employed and the appearance of volumes has been greatly enhanced.

Beginning with the papers of the Fourteenth Conference, papers were arranged topically into categories. The headings of these cate-
gories are not a perfect fit since in some cases papers would qualify both as history and ethnology. Also, because conference papers and proceedings contributions are voluntary, coverage in any given volume may be unavoidably very disparate. This is less noticeable in earlier volumes since there was no attempt to order the papers by topic or area. But the arrangement of papers into categories in the two most recent volumes tends to draw attention to the imbalance. For example, in the volume for the Fourteenth Conference, of the 31 published papers, 15 are on linguistics. The other categories are: education, 3 papers; history, 7 papers; and archaeology and ethnology, 6 papers. The volume for the Fifteenth Conference includes 31 papers, of which 3 are classified as education, 6 as ethnography, 6 as history/biography, 12 as linguistics and 4 as Midewiwin.

Although drawing conclusions from an account of this kind must be rather subjective, it is apparent that we have not achieved a perfect balance of disciplines nor of tribal coverage. The predominance of linguistics, which has been noted, does have a certain logic even for non-linguists, however, because the only claim to unity which the conference can have is that it focuses on Algonquian-speaking peoples. These peoples have no geographical or cultural uniformity, and it has been noted that until now some tribal groups have received attention in this conference only by linguists.

It is not easy to see how we can redress the imbalance in an open conference like this. It might help to re-examine the mailing list annually to ensure that potentially interested historians and archaeologists receive notice of the annual meeting. But I believe that the unspoken rule has been that those who wish to attend should, and that the papers which are read treat the subject which interest the readers. In this way we all get the benefit of what is currently going on in Algonquian studies, except as the location of an annual meeting affects the attendance. We may speculate that a meeting in, for example, Chicago or Winnipeg, would bring in fuller coverage of the Plains Algonquians and of those south of the Great Lakes. The single meeting in Green Bay, Wisconsin, points in that direction.

In any event, our defects seem to be only a failure to achieve ideal performance, and that should not dismay us too much. On the plus side of the ledger we have an active, self-perpetuating organism without officers, committees, bylaws or dues. And that's not bad. If we can take the Iroquois Conference, now in its 40th year and going
strong, as an example, we probably have a bright future and a long life ahead of us.