Initially when I began to search for evidence of mineral use or knowledge of minerals by the Southwestern Ojibwa I thought that little information was available. These preconceptions seemed to be confirmed when I asked Andy Sky of the Eagle Lake Reserve in Northwestern Ontario if he had ever heard of Ojibwa mining activities and received a negative response. However, anthropologists tend to be persistent. About an hour latter Andy and I were discussing garden islands in Eagle Lake when he mentioned that one of the islands had a pit about 20 feet deep on it where people dig pipestone. In fact, the historical record contains considerable evidence for Ojibwa knowledge concerning the use and value of mineral deposits.

Although there is a large body of data concerning Ojibwa knowledge of pipestone, mineral pigments and dyes, clay, and other minerals (Holzkamm 1987), this paper will be limited to a consideration of copper, gold, and silver. In 1873, when Treaty #3 was negotiated, it was believed that these metals were among the most valuable minerals within the area.

There is considerable evidence of prehistoric Indian use of native copper from the Lake Superior region (cf. Drier and Du Temple 1961; West 1970; Whittlesey 1862). This use was continued by the historic Ojibwa of Lake Superior where it was observed by Jesuit priests and French explorers (cf. Kellogg 1967:105, 113; WHC 16:72–76; Kinietz 1977:374–376). Fur traders continued to describe Ojibwa use of native copper into the 19th century.

1The Anishinabe of the Boundary Waters region prefer “Ojibway” to “Ojibwa”. However, the Algonquian Conference adheres to the format of the Handbook of North American Indians, which specifies “Ojibwa”. The author wishes to thank the Hudson’s Bay Company and TARR, Grand Council Treaty #3 for their gracious assistance and permission to consult their archives. Special recognition is accorded to Leo G. Waisberg, Ethnohistorian for Grand Council Treaty #3, for his valuable comments.
century (cf. Tyrrell 1916:215; Blaine 1969:187). Apparently native copper was being used at Rainy Lake during the historic period since an article in the *Rainy Lake Herald* dated 5 May 1898 describes the finding of a cache containing both stone and copper arrowheads and European trade goods (Winchell 1911:375). However, historic descriptions regarding the use of native copper in the Treaty #3 area have not yet been found.

The Lake Superior Ojibwa were also familiar with native silver. According to John Johnson’s description of Lake Superior from 1792 to 1807 native silver had been obtained by one chief from the vicinity of Fond du Lac:

> The Metal River is within ten leagues of Fond-du-Lac, and so called from the fact that the old chief of La Pointe, while descending the river, found a large piece of silver ore. (Masson 1889:169; see also Williams 1953:423 and Whittlesey 1884:339)

According to Peter Grant’s description of the Ojibwa in 1804 they already become fond of trade silver:

> Their intercourse with us has given them such an idea of the value of silver, that nothing in their estimation is so valuable and so becoming to set off their persons as trinkets made of that metal. (Masson 1889:318)

The Hudson’s Bay Company also introduced large quantities of trade silver to the Lac la Pluie District. The inventory in the account books for 1831–1832 lists as silver works on hand:

- 5 pr large arm bands
- 5 pr medium arm bands
- 6 1/2 pr small arm bands
- 4 hat bands, 3 in.
- 3 pr wrist bands, 1 1/2 in.
- 3 1/2 pr wrist bands, 1 1/4 in.
- 3 pr wrist bands, 1 in.
- 4 pr wrist bands, 3/4 in.
- 7 pr wrist bands, 1/2 in.
- 700 dbl large crosses
- 70 dbl small crosses
- 159 single small crosses
- 7 1/3 sets gorgets (3 per set)
- 5 sets moon (3 per set)
- 550 prs large ear rings
- 50 prs small ear rings
- 5 1/2 prs large ear wheels
- 12 med ear wheels
- 6 1/2 small wheels (HBCA B.105/d/35, fo. 4–6)
The variety and quantity of these silver goods indicates a considerable demand for them within the Treaty #3 area.

Along with a demand for silver trade goods, the Treaty #3 Ojibwa evidently developed some skill at evaluating silver items. This was made quite clear by Manitobiness during the treaty negotiations at Northwest Angle on 30 September 1873. Speaking to Governor Morris, Manitobiness struck the medal with his knife and then stated:

I am going to tell you one thing — I take your hand in a friendly way. Let the promises you have made and the business concluded last as long as the sun is over our heads. I shew this medal given at the Treaty in Red River — they called it silver — I do not. I would be ashamed to wear it on my breast. I would not disgrace the Queen. (PAC, MG29, C67)

A number of references in the historic literature indicate that the Ojibwa of the Treaty #3 area were beginning to participate in copper exploration and mining activities by the mid-19th century. In his description of the area between Grand Portage and Lake of the Woods, Bigsby (1969:239) comments that: “Although the region now to be entered upon be almost certainly metalliferous, a party of miners being now at work close to it...” Although Bigsby’s visit to the area took place several decades prior to mid-century, it is clear from his comments elsewhere that he incorporated more recent data. His reference to miners in the region would seem to fall within that category.

Agassiz (1850) in the report on his expedition along the north shore of Lake Superior has commented on the numerous camps of copper prospectors. Apparently, these camps were known to the Indians of the Treaty #3 area and there is evidence for Ojibwa participation in commercial mining activities. According to the Lac Seul Post Journal for 1846–1847, written by Charles McKenzie:

La Main and Chassrun come from beyond Sturgeon Lake. These so far escaped the Measles. They got each a good Round debt, they left the La Chovittis of Nipigon not far from their tents who had been at Nipigon of late, the most of those of that post passed the Summer with the Miners on Lake Superior, and the few that returned were loaded with fine goods. (HBCA B.107/a/25, fo. 7)

Ojibwa participation in these activities probably increased their knowledge and awareness of the value of mineral resources.

Apparently what they had heard from other groups and observed themselves led the Ojibwa to become cautious regarding travelers who paid close attention to geological features. During the Palliser expedition’s visit to Fort Frances in 1857 they were instructed by the chief not to pick up any rocks:
After sitting for 2 1/4 hrs in a broiling sun, we parted good friends, the chief requesting that Dr H. should take no stones out of his country, M. Bourgeau collect no botanical specimens and I to take no Astronomical observations — In fact the chief gave us a holiday. (Spry 1968:78)

Evidently, Ojibwa objections to government exploration were not consistent since S.J. Dawson reported that he had obtained permission following a grand council at Fort Frances (Dawson 1968).

The discovery of minerals in Indian lands historically has frequently been a source of friction with non-Indians. The Vermillion Lake gold rush of 1865 in northern Minnesota not far from the Treaty #3 area had that result. This gold rush was perceived by the Bois Fort bands with some dismay and their protests were noted in the annual reports of the U.S. Indian agent. In his report to the U.S. Commissioner of Indian Affairs, dated 8 November 1865, Webb noted:

Since the discovery of gold on the north shore of Lake Superior, some difficulty has arisen between the Bois Fort bands of Chippewas and the whites... Within the past week there were rumors that they had forbidden the whites to come into the country. I would suggest the importance of settling the question with the Indians as to the title to the territory in dispute at an early day. (H.ex.doc.l(39-l)1248, pp. 693–694)

The next annual report noted that a treaty had been concluded with the Bois Fort bands primarily for the reasons cited the previous year (H.ex.doc.l (39-2)1284, p. 7).

By 1870 gold had been discovered on Rainy Lake and Dawson was recommending that a treaty be negotiated with the Ojibwa. Such a treaty would open a transportation route to the Red River and in Dawson’s opinion could also establish reserves at locations where minerals would provide potential funds for the Indians (PAC, MG11, C.O. 42, vol. 698, pp. 126–148).

Apparently, the Ojibwa became alarmed enough by mining activities in 1872 to try to halt mining operations and prospecting until a treaty had been negotiated. According to a July 7th “Letter from Fort Frances” published in the newspaper:

Since writing the above the ‘Black Stone’ and other Indians have come in to say that they desire all mining operations and prospecting for mines or, as he called it, ‘picking the (rocks)’ to be discontinued and that if any miners or prospectors were found at work, the Indians would stop them... (PAC, RG10, v. 1869, f. 582)

During the summer of 1872, W.M. Simpson, S.J. Dawson, and R.J. Pither attempted to negotiate a treaty with the Treaty #3 area Ojibwa. This
attempt to negotiate a treaty failed for a number of reasons. One of these reasons was the Ojibwa objection to a proposed $3.00 annuity on the basis of gold and silver wealth in their country. According to the commissioners:

... we may mention the fact that they are well informed as to the discovery of gold and silver to the west of the watershed, and have not been slow to give us their views as to the value of that discovery. ‘You offer us’, said they, ‘$3 per head and you have only to pick up gold and silver from our rocks to pay it many times over’. The Chief of the section where the discoveries have taken place was emphatic in expressing his determination to keep miners from his country until he had been paid for his land. (PAC, RG10, vol. 1868, f. 577)

Clearly the Ojibwa recognized that mineral resources were a major motivation for the government’s desire to negotiate a treaty for their lands. It is equally obvious that the Treaty #3 area Ojibwa recognized the value of these mineral resources.

The Treaty #3 Ojibwa concern over mineral rights was further highlighted by two petitions or memorials dated August 30, 1872 and October 3, 1872. Dawson apparently believed that the first petition was forged. In a letter responding to Blackstone’s allegation of August 30, 1872 that Dawson was interested in mineral lands, Dawson stated:

All they seem desirous of is to make a large amount out of mineral lands which they are having surveyed. In reply to this it is only necessary to say that the Indian Territories are not as yet organized and no one can at present acquire minerals or other lands therein... (PAC, RG10, v. 1872, f. 747)

However, the October 3, 1872 memorial signed by Blackstone, Head Chief, Ba Pa Ma Jos, Chief of Rainy Lake, and Ka Ba Gwa, Chief of Lac la Croix, restates the objective relative to surveying and mining:

... about my proposal for making a Treaty and sale of our Lands. I would wish to get an answer to that part of my former Memorial as persons are constantly upon the territory exploring and surveying our lands as well as mining. We would like to be answered as above at a early day so that we may be able to judge what we are to do. My people many of them are here now with me waiting your... answer.
We cannot treat or have anything to do with Mr. Dawson in this affair or Mr. McIntyre.
We shall not give up our property and let it be taken from us by force but as said in our other letter are willing to make a Treaty upon fair terms.
Our land extends from Fort Frances this way to the heighth of Land. (PAC, RG10, v. 1872, f. 747)

The following year, Governor Morris reported the successful conclusion of treaty at the Northwest Angle of Lake of the Woods on September 30th.
His report stated that the minerals issue had come up again. To quote Morris:

They [the Chiefs] asked if the mines would be theirs — I said if they were found on their reserves it would be to their benefit, but not otherwise — They asked if an Indian found a mine, would he be paid for it — I told them he could sell his information, if he could find a purchaser, like any other person. (PAC, RG 10, v. 1918, f. 2790B)

However, the document prepared by Her Majesty’s commissioners and endorsed as the treaty is silent on this point. Two other versions of the treaty agreements are in close agreement with Morris’s report.

The Nolin and Paypom documents, both of which are entitled “the terms of the Treaty held at North West Angle the Third day of October, Eighteen Hundred and Seventy Three”, detail the promise as follows:

(Paypom): If some gold or silver mines be found in their reserves, it will be to the benefit of the Indians, but if the Indians find any gold or silver mines out of their reserves they will only be paid the finding of the mines; (Grand Council Treaty #3:nd)

(Joseph Nolin): If some gold or silver mines be found in their reserves it will be to the benefit of the Indians, but if the Indians find any gold or silver mines out of their reserves they will be paid for the finding of the mines.

(PAM, Alex. Morris Papers, LG MG12, B1, #511)

Evidently, the Treaty #3 Ojibwa took the treaty promises at face value and began to search for deposits of valuable minerals. According to an 1874 report to the Department of Public Works by Dawson:

The Indians, both of Rainy Lake and the Lake of the Woods, have among them specimens of native gold and silver ore which they affirm is to be found in places known to them in abundance, and the rock formation is such as to corroborate their statement. (CSP #7, Appendix #23, p. 189. A. 1875)

However, by 1890 it was obvious to the Ojibwa that the outside promises regarding mineral rights on reserves were not necessarily being honored. In a letter dated 4 August 1890, Chief Thomas Lindsay of the Rat Portage Band protested the operation of the Sultana gold mine:

We were promised at the Treaty that if we discovered any valuable minerals on the Reserves the land would be sold with our consent and the money placed to our credit. Now we discovered Gold on the Reserve or Penninsula and we surrendered part of it to the Department and we now hear that the Kewatin Lumber Company lay claim to it. On the strength of the promise made to us at Treaty we surrendered the land and we now hear that we are to loose it. We have always endeavored to follow the promises we made to the Queen at the Treaty and we hope and trust the Queen will fulfill her promises made to us at the Treaty. (PAC, RG10, v. 3696, f. 15410)
The Ojibwa assertions of outside promises are further supported by legal opinions. A report to the Superintendent General of Indian Affairs by Reginald Rimmer (1901) and a statement by Edward Blake to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council on 8 July 1902 (AO, Irving Papers, 41/40/08: pp. 10–11) both state that the Indians had retained rights to the reserve minerals during treaty negotiations and should be allowed to exercise these rights.

In 1924 Canada and Ontario entered into a new statutory agreement (Statutes of Canada 1924, c. 48; Statutes of Ontario 1924, c. 15) which allowed one-half of the proceeds from the disposition of mineral rights on Indian reserves in Ontario to be paid to the province. In this agreement an exception was made in regard to Treaty #3 by which the Indians received all of the proceeds. Since 1958 Canada and Ontario have considered amending or replacing the 1924 agreement. In 1983 the government of Ontario offered to make individual agreements with bands which would allow them the full proceeds from mineral rights in exchange for release from other outstanding claims. Since the benefits from mineral resources had already been reserved through outside promises this process could potentially put other legitimate claims of Treaty #3 bands into jeopardy. In this context, Ojibwa knowledge and actions regarding minerals prior to 1873 may become a significant issue.

REFERENCES

Agassiz, Louis


AO = Archives of Ontario

1902 Aemilius Irving Papers. 41/40/08.

Bigsby, John J.


Blain, James ed.

1969 *Travels and Adventures in Canada and the Indian Territories Between the Years 1760 and 1776.* Rutland, Vermont: Charles E. Tuttle. [Originally published 1901].

CSP = Canada Sessional Papers

1875 #7, Appendix #23, A. 1875.

Dawson, Simon James

Drier, Roy Ward, and Octave Joseph Du Temple, compilers
1961 Prehistoric Copper Mining in the Lake Superior Region. Calumet, Michigan: Privately Published.

Grand Council Treaty #3

HBCA = Hudson's Bay Company Archives, Provincial Archives of Manitoba

H.ex.doc.1(39-1)1248

H.ex.doc.1(39-2)1284
1866 Annual Report of the U.S. Commissioner of Indian Affairs for 1866. Washington D.C.

Holzkamm, Tim E.

Kellogg, Louise Phelps, ed.

Kinietz, W. Vernon


PAC = Public Archives of Canada

PAM = Provincial Archives of Manitoba
1873 Alex. Morris Papers, Lieutenant Governor series. Manuscript Group 12, B1, #511.

Spry, Irene M., ed.

Tyrrell, Joseph B., ed.
West, George A.

WHC = Wisconsin Historical Society

Whittlesey, Charles

Williams, Mentor L., ed.

Winchell, Newton Horace