



Cree Time

A student expands her horizons in northern Quebec.

by Olivia Wrobel '12

Photos by Paul Barten

A dense morning fog covered the vast snowy landscape, enveloping the tops of black spruce trees in low clouds. Except for the distant cry of a raven or the occasional snap of a twig, the snow underfoot was the only sound to penetrate the silence of the boreal forest. Ahead of me, Lawrence Capissit, our Cree guide, traveled effortlessly on his snowshoes. The wet snow piled up heavily on mine, hindering my stride across this unfamiliar terrain. But with each step I took, the excitement built inside me. Much of what we had been reading and discussing for weeks in our Cree Culture, Natural Resources, and Sustainability course in preparation for this trip to the James Bay region of northern Quebec was now real.



Lawrence paused along the trail from time to time and quietly pointed out an old beaver dam, the fresh tracks of a ptarmigan, a Canada jay perched in nearby tree. Accepting traditional Cree values, Lawrence and other Cree people see this land as their responsibility to nurture and protect. They refer to it as a garden (not a wilderness) that has sustained them for 3,000 years—at least 150 generations. The elders say, “The Cree people need the forest to survive, but the forest does not need the Cree people,” and this consciousness and respect is evident in their daily lives.

Since the 1970s, however, their strong ties to the land have been constantly challenged by the demands of millions of people to the south for energy and natural resources. While silently following

in his snowshoe tracks, I was abruptly stopped by the sight of Lawrence gazing at a 500 foot-wide power line; it extends all the way to New York and southern New England, where it supplies about one third of our electricity. This once pristine Cree hunting territory and much of the James Bay region have been substantially changed by a massive system of dams, reservoirs, power plants, roads, and transmission lines that cover an area as large as the state of Florida.

The steel towers and power lines loomed above us like frustrated giants, sending an eerie crackle of 750,000 volts through the foggy air on that winter day. The sound of these transmission lines can be heard for surprising distances in the silent forest. Even in the relative isolation of the winter bush camp you can see them above the trees in the distance. Whether he was simply waiting beneath the lines for us to catch up, stopping there for emphasis, or both, Lawrence did not say.

In a remarkably short time I could begin to feel my senses sharpening to this new world and culture. I noted how different, and yet at times how similar, my life really was to the lives of these people 800 miles north of the place I call home. Professor Paul Barten and the trip leaders told us we would learn best by careful observation, as Cree people of all ages have done for millennia. The wisdom of this advice became more evident with each passing day. We witnessed the skill and patience the Cree people exhibit in everything they do, from collecting spruce boughs for the tent floors to stretching and smoke-tanning a moose hide.

Olivia Wrobel '13




The Cree Class

Cree Culture, Natural Resources, and Sustainability is an interdisciplinary course led by Professor Paul Barten in the Department of Environmental Conservation. The class is built around a 10-day experiential learning trip to the James Bay region of northern Quebec. Students learn about the complex influences of a global market for energy and natural resources on the forests and indigenous people of northern Quebec, an ecosystem and culture that are no longer protected by geographic isolation. Five UMass Amherst students joined the trip last March, including **OLIVIA WROBEL '12**, an English major and Natural Resources Conservation minor, who wrote about her experience for *UMass Amherst* magazine.

The trip is held in partnership with the Hulbert Outdoor Center in Fairlee, Vermont. Hans Carlson of Hulbert wrote one of the books used for the Cree Culture course, *Home is the Hunter: The James Bay Cree and Their Land*. David and Anna Bosum, the founders of Nuuchimi Wiinuu (meaning ‘Forest People’ in Cree), an ecotourism enterprise, are gracious hosts and exceptional teachers in their traditional winter camp and in the Cree village of Oujé-Bougoumou. Their lifelong friend, Lawrence Capissit, helps with large groups. Barten’s class also visited the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Quebec, the Cree Cultural Institute, and the Barrette-Chapais sawmill.



A person wearing a backpack and skis stands in a snowy, foggy landscape. In the background, a large, tall metal power line tower rises into the misty air. The scene is overcast and wintry.

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ERIN SCHAEFFER '12G

Shortly after I was welcomed into David and Anna Bosum's winter camp, Anna invited me to help her prepare speckled trout for our dinner. Any shyness or distance I felt between us was quickly erased by a conversation about our families. Anna told me she hoped her 11 children would do right in the world by sharing important knowledge and lessons from the past with their young ones—her 53 grandchildren! As any mother would, she explained how she wanted her children to have a real sense of where they came from, and what they could accomplish in relation to their Cree heritage. Like Anna, every person we encountered was genuinely happy to greet us and sincere and open in conversation. We all felt a sense of trust and of community. I didn't anticipate or expect this feeling of heartfelt welcome, but clearly it's true that a good meal and a friendly smile are gestures of friendship and respect in any culture. It also helped that our trip leaders are well liked and respected by the Cree.

Although our class had read about and discussed many aspects of Cree culture and ways of life, no amount of research could convey the feeling of fresh forest air, the nearly complete dismissal of modern life, or other unique opportunities this trip would provide. One memorable night, we ventured out

onto the frozen lake to gaze into the crystal clear depths of a velvet black sky. Faintly on the horizon, we could see a shimmering green curtain moving across the sky in rippling waves. My wish to see the Northern Lights, or what the Cree call "the Dance of the Spirits," had been granted.

During one particularly eventful day, David announced that we would be setting the ice fishing net out on the lake. The Cree have used his ingenious technique for centuries. With a few simple tools, we threaded a 200-foot net through a series of holes in the 18-inch-thick ice with a rope attached to a spruce pole. The work, though sometimes difficult, went quickly with so many helping hands. Our reward of a meal of fish the next day was well worth all the hard work. In fact, we had more than enough for several delicious meals.

Our days in the Bosum's winter camp were full and tranquil, but fleeting. We arrived in Oujé-Bougoumou in mid-March when the weather is typically as cold as January in Massachusetts, but the weather was unusually mild, and it was a pleasure to cast off my warm woolen layers and bask in the sun. By the time we left the camp, a lush carpet of sphagnum and reindeer moss and heath shrubs was revealed under the melting snow. The weather made daily tasks enjoyable, as we



all took turns carrying water from the lake, splitting firewood, gathering spruce boughs, preparing hearty meals, and washing dishes.

Anna, David, and Lawrence were eager to teach us traditional skills such as wood carving, embroidery, and leather work. Anna taught me how to make a pair of mittens from a small part of a moose hide she had tanned earlier that season. Other women in our group made traditional leather pouches or canvas haversacks, all embroidered in the Cree style. Every night after dinner we worked by the light of a lantern.

In camp and in the village we lived and learned on “Cree time,” abandoning arbitrary schedules and time constraints. The days unfolded naturally, as they were meant to happen, yet every task was satisfactorily accomplished. Back at UMass and at home I find traces of Cree ways newly enmeshed in my own. I am more aware of my environment, physically and conceptually, as I walk across campus and spend time in the woodland areas of Amherst. The word community means more to me than ever before, and within that notion I realized how much we had learned from living with people whose ways are so different from mine. This meaningful shift in perspective is one that cannot be fully taught without first-hand experience. I believe that the knowledge and experience I gained in my days in a spruce forest along the shore of a frozen lake with the Oujé-Bougoumou Cree will stay with me my whole life. I hope that other UMass students, motivated by their desires to expand their awareness of the world in unique ways, will learn about Cree culture, natural resources, and sustainability in years to come. **UM**



Professor Paul Barten documented his class's trip in pictures. From the top: Olivia's moose hide mittens; students ice fish the Cree way; lugging water to camp; daybreak at the lake.

