

Your Opinion

Native community goes soul searching

"I don't know where we're going, but we'll go as far as we can." *Jim Windigo, Master of Ceremonies, Pays Plat First Nation Traditional Pow-Wow, Saturday, September 12, 1992.*

Jim Windigo was at the microphone for three long evenings and three longer afternoons, telling the odd joke and introducing the next song or dance. With the endurance of Joe Clark, the one-armed man from Fort Frances stood inside the MC stand overlooking the Pow-Wow grounds.

An eight-sided "pagoda" roof supported by large logs had been newly built at the centre of the circle, protecting the drummers, singers and sound equipment from the rain, but not the wind. A much wider circle of picnic tables and lawn chairs welcomed everyone to sit down and join in. Drummers and singers from Duluth, Geraldton, Rocky Bay, Lake Helen, Thunder Bay, Shoal Lake and

Fort Frances took turns singing and drumming with two groups from the host reserve: *The Pays Plat Singers* and *Little Fire*. Taking turns as they did, the drumming never stopped. The relentless beat and amplified waiting voices could be heard up and down the Trans-Canada Highway, attracting tourists and truckers to stop.



**NORTHERN
INSIGHTS**
by Larry Sanders



organizer, calls it "a healing circle." He told me the story of Norman Achneepineskum, a 24-year old resident of Pays Plat, who began the revival of traditional singing and dancing on the reserve in 1990.

"There was a group of people run-

ning across Canada to support the warriors in Oka (Quebec) that summer,"

Norman said. "One of the people with the runners was an old man, with a hand drum. When they stopped overnight in Pays Plat, the old man showed Norman how to drum. That inspired him. Two weeks later, I saw him walking in front of my house, banging an old drum he found. He didn't know how to sing, but he was so happy to be drumming and kind of finding himself. I invited him for a

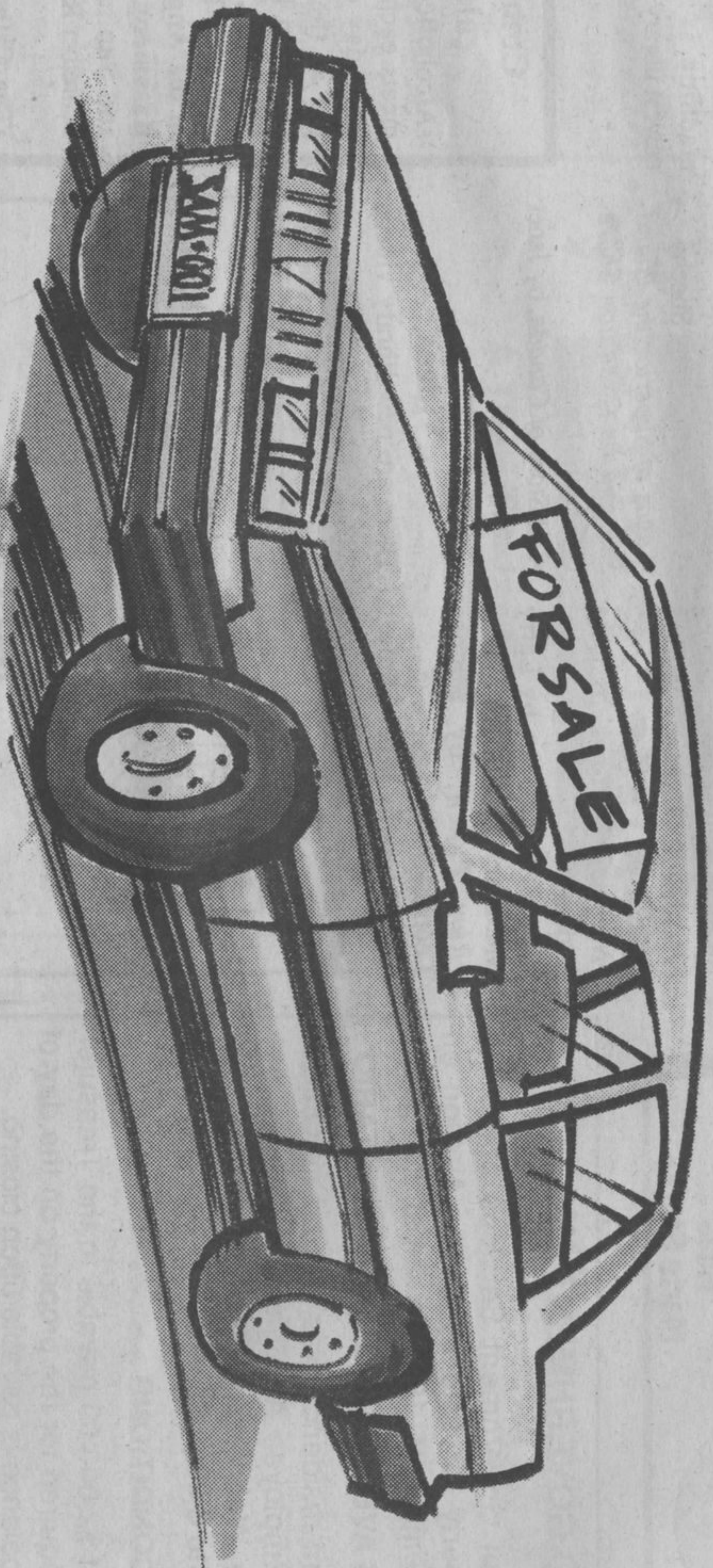
hamburger, and we talked and laughed with joy."

Ken gave Norman a moose hide, to make a proper drum. Norman phoned all over Canada and the United States, asking people how to make a drum and where to learn how to sing. "That's how the *Pays Plat Singers* got started," Ken told me.

Learning how to sing and drum doesn't sound remarkable. But Pays Plat is a community struggling to find itself. Broken by generations of alcohol abuse, welfare dependency, internal feuds and exploitation by white entrepreneurs (not to mention being literally split down the middle by the Trans-Canada Highway), this reserve between Nipigon and Rossport has been looking for its soul. Like other communities seeking a soul, the major problem is knowing where to start the search.

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