

# Historica Canada Education Portal

## Chasing Shadows: The Simon Gunanoot Story

### Overview

This lesson is based on viewing the Simon Gunanoot biography from [The Canadians](#) series. Gunanoot was the subject of one of the most famous manhunts in Canadian history. Accused of murder, he spent thirteen years on the run before turning himself in.

### Aims

Students will examine what life was like for Gunanoot and his family during their thirteen years in hiding, and they will learn about the political unrest and historical context in which these events occurred.

### Background

Simon Gunanoot was born in 1874. His mother was a Gitksan chief of the Fireweed Clan, and his father, Nah Gun, was a hereditary chief of the Frog Clan. As a child, he learned to trap beaver and other valuable survival skills travelling in the northern mountains. He later married Sarah, a woman from the distant village of Kitseegas, and began living a life divided between the bush and his store in Kispiox. Gunanoot's quiet life changed forever one night when he travelled from Hazelton to Two

Mile village. He lost a fight to bartender Alex MacIntosh, and left the tavern vowing revenge. MacIntosh was later found dead, along with stump farmer Max LeClair. A warrant was issued for Gunanoot's arrest, beginning a thirteen-year manhunt.

The murders shocked the community of Hazelton, and Police Officer Kirby had difficulty tracking Simon Gunanoot after a series of disasters on the difficult northern terrain. Kirby arrested Simon's father, Nah Gun, in an attempt to draw Simon out of hiding. The attempt failed, and the elderly father escaped to join his son. Officer Berryman, who replaced Kirby, also failed in his attempt to capture Gunanoot. Several expeditions by different men, including the famed Pinkerton agents from Seattle were unsuccessful, and each returned empty-handed.

In 1911, the official search for Simon ended, leaving a reward of \$2300 for interested bounty hunters. Gunanoot led a successful life on the trail, travelling from town to town to avoid detection. Friends welcomed him at every stop, and his children learned how to live in the wild. Simon dealt with many hardships during his time on the run, including the death of his father and the loss of a child during childbirth. Amidst these hardships, Gunanoot took his family to town to see their first moving picture show, in order to give his kids a glimpse of both worlds.

George Beirnes, a friend who gave Simon supplies, convinced him to give himself up. Simon hired Stuart Henderson, the best criminal lawyer in Canada, and went to trial in 1919. Public opinion towards Simon began to change. In 1906, the *Victoria Colonist*, had called him "another murdering Indian;" now, the paper portrayed him as a hero who had defied the authorities and overcome adversity. Henderson had the case transferred from the Hazelton Court to Vancouver, where Simon was met with an all-white jury. The jurors deliberated for thirteen minutes

(coincidentally one minute for every year he was on the run), and found him not guilty. The one piece of evidence that could have been detrimental to his case, a confession Gunanoot had given McPhail, was never used in court, and Gunanoot himself never testified.

Following the trial, Sarah reopened the Kispiox store, and Simon settled on his ranch, trapping and prospecting with George Beirnes and Stuart Henderson. Gunanoot died in 1933 of pneumonia, yet he remains a defiant symbol of unrest in Canada in the early 1900s.

## **Activities**

### **1. Find Gunanoot: Making a Wanted Poster**

Have students review the physical description of Gunanoot. Talk with students about the changing reward that was put in place for Gunanoot by the various police officers. Ask them to work in pairs to compile a list of reasons why Gunanoot was able to evade capture. Discuss what they would do if they were Kirby, how they would have handled the situation differently.

After the Pinkerton agents failed, the search for Gunanoot was called off, leaving a reward of \$2300 for bounty hunters. Discuss with the class what a bounty hunter is, and ask if they would have tried to find Gunanoot.

Tell students that they will be making a wanted poster for Gunanoot. Explain that the poster should have the fugitive's name, a depiction of Gunanoot, the explanation of his crime (discuss how the details would be exaggerated), and someone to contact if they spot Gunanoot. Students should also pay attention to appropriate language and format for the time

period. When students have completed their posters, have them put them up around the class.

## **2. Travel Northern Canada: Tracking Gunanoot's voyage**

Discuss with students the voyage Gunanoot took on his travels; the weather conditions, the supplies he would have needed, the towns he visited, where the towns are, etc. Have students do research to review where the towns are: Kispiox, Hazelton, etc.

After students have located these cities on a map, let them know they will be using the map to track ten days of Gunanoot's travels.

They will use the map to plan how they will travel for ten days – what supplies they will need, what the temperature would be. They should also plan where they will be staying each night of their travels, whether they will be staying with friends or whether they will have to create shelter to stay in. Included in their plan should be mock conversations with people they will meet during their travels, as well as possible brushes with the law.

They should make a map from the research (even if they cannot find the remote cities mentioned in the video), and put point A on the map, and point B where they will be travelling to.

When students are finished (it may take several days to complete), they should present their voyages to the class. The lesson can end with a discussion about the advantages and disadvantages of each approach.

## **3. Diary Entry: A day in the life of Simon Gunanoot's children**

Have students review the section of the film (or transcript) involving Gunanoot's children and the experiences they had while on the run with their father.

Ask students what type of details would be included in a child's diary. Have them pick five specific events (the trip to the movie theatre, a close-call with the Police, the trapping of a dangerous animal, etc.). Give them five pieces of legal paper, and have them fold it in half, making a diary with a cover, a page for every entry, and a page for a picture for every entry. Review techniques students can use to make paper look older (tea bags, burning the edges, calligraphy pens, etc). Students should use as many details from the film as possible, and may use images from the video for models when drawing their pictures.

#### **4. Crime Scene Investigation: Taking on Officer Kirby's role**

Ask students to discuss what they know about crime scenes. Where is their information from? What crime shows have they watched on television? What details do the officers have to put in their reports? What are they looking for? Who are they interviewing on the site?

Explain to students that they will be writing a crime scene report from officer Kirby's perspective. Have them work in pairs and write down any details they believe Kirby may have discovered when he arrived at the scene of the murders. They will need to include in their report a list of details they notice, as well as interviews with people they question.

Their report length can vary according to time allotment, but should include as many specific details as possible.

#### **5. Mock Trial: Gunanoot's fate**

Students should review the details of Gunanoot's trial. Make sure they know who all of the key figures were.

Working in groups of five or six, students will re-create the trial of Gunanoot. They will spend time working on their script, the setting, costumes, and direction, eventually performing a mock trial for the class. They will work on examining witnesses, create testimony for Gunanoot and Sarah.

Although many of these people did not speak at the trial, it will be up to the students to create dialogue for them. What would they say? Students should use appropriate language and setting. When finished, have students perform their mock trials to the class.

## **6. Political Unrest**

In the video, the narrator mentions that the time Gunanoot is on the run is also a time of political unrest for First Nations individuals in the community. Discuss the problems First Nations experienced during Gunanoot's time. Discuss more recent problems Aboriginal communities and individuals face.

Assign students a research paper, having them write about a struggle a group of First Nations have undergone, or have them research First Nations groups in their community.

When students have finished their reports, they should present the information they have learned to the class.

## **Resources**

Williams, David R. *Trapline Outlaw: Simon Peter Gunanoot* Victoria;  
Sono Nis Pres, 1982.

[Simon Peter Gunanoot - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

[Northern Canada](#)