

Synopsis
“Bear Walker”
A story based on true events

By
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Late in the afternoon of June 30, 1995, Leon Jacko killed Ron Thompson on Indian Mountain, Manitoulin Island, Ontario, Canada.

Manitoulin Island sits near the north shore of Lake Huron, a drive of an hour or so from Sudbury, Ontario. The island includes the Sheguiandah First Nations Territory, home to native North American Indians, mostly Ojibwe. Jacko and Thompson were both Ojibwe, distant cousins, close friends, and drinking buddies.

At the time of the killing Jacko was 19 years of age and Thompson was 45. Jacko was skinny as a reed, long limbed and graceful – almost effeminate. Thompson was short, stocky, and muscular. Incredible as it seems, Jacko clubbed Thompson to death with a walrus bone.

After the killing Jacko surrendered to law enforcement officers late that same evening. He was held in jail in Sudbury, charged with murder. His first attorney took no positive steps to forward his interests. Several months later Sudbury attorney Berk Keaney took over as counsel for the accused. One of his first moves was to get the court to reduce the charge against Jacko from murder to manslaughter.

In what was to be brief, but intense courtroom battle, the case went to trial in Gore Bay, Ontario, in May of 1997. The defense opted for a trial before a judge, without a jury. Justice Richard Trainor, a highly respected member of the provincial court system, heard the case.

Prosecutor John Luczak claimed Leon Jacko had killed Ron Thompson in a drunken brawl. He presented evidence from the crime scene, including the weapon, and offered the testimony of several witnesses and the arresting officers.

Keaney argued Jacko had acted in self-defense and in defense of his native community. He explained that Thompson had bragged about possessing supernatural powers. Among the superstitious Ojibwe such claims lead to the fear he might be a “Bear Walker,” an evil aboriginal spirit capable of shape-shifting, traveling from one place to another at incredible speeds, and inflicting unspeakable torment and hideous death on its victims. To an Ojibwe the curse of a Bear Walker was cause for great fear.

Keaney presented the testimony of witnesses who recalled what Jacko had said on the night of the incident: “I’ve been in a battle with the spirit. I killed the Bear Walker.” Keaney also offered the testimony of Jacko’s father, who, as a spiritual leader among the Ojibwe, had instilled in his son the knowledge of Indian lore and warned him about the threat posed by Bear Walkers.

On May 29, 1997 Justice Trainor rendered a verdict of not guilty, accepting Jacko’s sincerely held spiritual beliefs as a reasonable basis for self-defense. This controversial decision triggered debate within the legal community and also stirred up vehement protests from WICCA adherents in Canada who argued that if Jacko motivated by his spiritual beliefs could get away with murder, Witches might be victimized by Christians in the name of their religion; a throwback to the treatment of Witches during the Medieval Inquisition.

Set against the backdrop of a forested rural island this story will make a compelling film.