

Chiefs of the Valley

Text and Photos by Ann-Charlotte Berglund

The summer of 1990 was a pivotal one for Canadian Indians. The tragedies at Oka, Quebec focused the country's attention once and for all on the plight of this country's aboriginal peoples. The legacy of the Mohawk confrontation there has become a national one, affecting all Canadian Indian nations. Okanagan Indians actively supported their brothers' cause in Quebec through road block demonstrations and by initiating a cross-country run in sympathy.

The spring of 1991 served to further heighten their consciousness. The Supreme Court of B.C. all but scrapped a comprehensive land claim set forth by a group of northern B.C. bands. The court effectively declared that Indian land claim questions could not be answered wholly by the judicial system.

Polls have indicated that there is more 'white' sympathy for Canadian Indians now than ever before. The Oka standoff achieved that much.

But there still remains a great many questions and misunderstood aims of the aboriginal people. Freelance writer and Okanagan Life columnist Ann Charlotte-Berglund, who for 25 years has been interested in and written extensively about the Indian situation, undertook to discover what their newly-focused hopes and dreams

are all about.

Berglund aimed to achieve profiles of Indian Chiefs and from their personalities, perhaps understand a little better what the so-called 'Indian problem' is all about, at least in this valley. Instead of seeking the pat answers from band administrators - the Indian nations' answer to the white man's bureaucrat - she sought out the Chiefs who are, after all, democratically representative of their people.

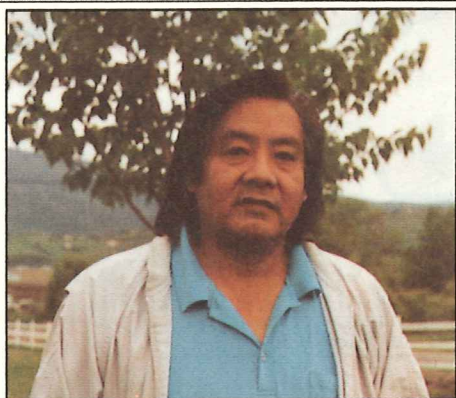
The contrasts between Chiefs is interesting in itself. Among the six tribal heads interviewed were 71-year-old Barnett John Allison, a rancher who is still very much committed to an agrarian way of life. Archie Jack, a stubborn and determined bucking horse cowboy, is also a respected school trustee in the Penticton area. Robert Louie is a very sharp lawyer with progressive plans for the band he leads, located near the fast-developing City of Kelowna. They bicker among themselves and find room for disagreement yet they must also find ways to pull together as a Tribal Council if their claims are to be at all effective.

"Their's is a deep common culture and they feel very much as one people; that they are all brothers and sisters in this, despite their different views," says Berglund. The following is her report.

There are about 3,000 Okanagan Indians. They belong to six bands, some of them consisting of several reserves. The six bands make up the Okanagan Tribal Council, which under a so-called "comprehensive claim", declares the Okanagan Indians the rightful owners to most of our valley, which is the ancient Okanagan Indian territory and stretches from the Kootenays to the Thompson east-west, and from the U.S. border to the Shuswap south-north.

This "comprehensive claim" may never be filed with the courts. Each band is however, currently preparing "specific claims", which will be brought to court by the Okanagan Tribal Council.

(Our information about reserve size, claims etc. may not be perfectly correct nor complete, and should be accepted as such. It should be noted that "cut-off" lands refers to land deleted from reserves mainly in the early 1900's. Many of these situations have been settled, at least partially.)



Chief Albert Saddleman, Okanagan Band

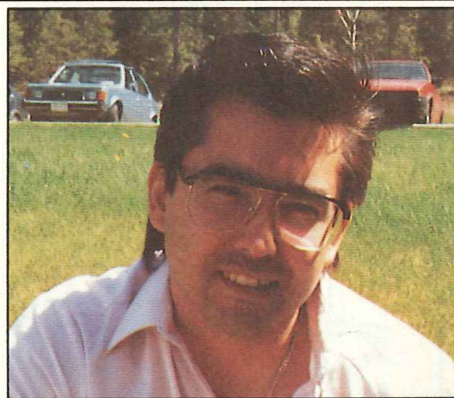
47 years old, chief since March 1991.

Reserve Size: 25,000 acres. In 1912 "cut-off" lands lost 120 acres, with half of the land returned in 1984 plus cash compensation.

Specific Claims: About 26,000 acres around Vernon and the Arrow Lakes and part of the Commonage south of Vernon.

Band Members: 1,200

Non-Indian Residents on Reserve Land: About 2,000. Varies as the band has large recreational developments, including 500 summer cabins.



Chief Robert Louie, Westbank Band

39 years old, chief since 1987.

Reserve Size: 2,400 acres. In the early 1900's, "cut-off" lands lost 1,000 acres, partly settled by cash compensation around 1981.

Specific Claims: Partly they overlap with North Okanagan commonage. They include part of certain highways and roads connected with reserve property. Certain foreshore rights along the part of Okanagan Lake that abuts the reserve.

Band Members: 425.

Non-Indian Residents on Reserve: About 5,000.



Chief Archie Jack, Penticton Band

56 years old, chief 1969 - 1970 and since 1988.

Reserve Size: 43,000 acres. "Cut-off" lands in the early 1900's: 12,000 acres, settled in 1982 by parts of land returned plus cash.

Specific Claims: Chief Jack says he's not interested in specific pieces, but wants "the whole thing" (the comprehensive land claim).

Band Members: 642.

Non-Indian Residents on Reserve Land: About 50.



Chief Clarence Louie, Osoyoos Band

30 years old, chief since 1987.

Reserve Size: 32,000 acres. Early 1900's "cut-off" lands: 72 acres settled in 1981.

Specific Claims: Everything east of the Okanagan River from the north end of Osoyoos Lake to the north end of Gallagher Lake, about 4,200 acres. Also 40 acres east of Osoyoos Lake, now flooded by the Zosel Dam on the U.S. side.

Band Members: 290.

Non-Indian Residents on Reserve Land: About 200.



Chief Edward Slim Allison, Upper Similkameen Band

66 years old, chief since 1983.

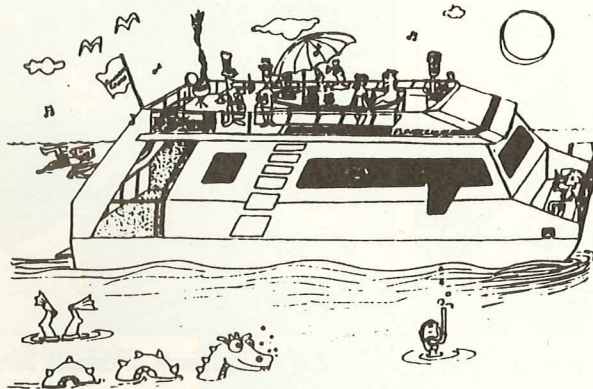
Reserve Size: 6,500 acres. Claim: No settlement reached on "cut-off" lands in 1912. A claim to the total Similkameen watershed filed under a comprehensive claim with the Nicola Tribal Council in 1987, may also be filed under the OTC claim.

Band Members: 43

Non-Indian Residents on Reserve Land: Very few.

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*Chief Barnett John Allison,
Lower Similkameen Band*

71 years old, chief since 1962.

Reserve Size: 40,000 acres.

Specific Claims: 20 miles each side of the Similkameen River plus U.S. territory occupied by the band before the 49th parallel.

Band Members: 300.

Non-Indian Residents on Reserve Land: Very few.

In late May Okanagan Life visited with the Chief of each band separately, and asked the same set of questions. The replies have been arranged in geographical order, going from north to south. Due to lack of time Chief Slim Allison's answers cover only the last question part.

1. What is your first aim as chief?

CHIEF ALBERT: Improve services to the band, above all in education and housing.

CHIEF ROBERT: Everything that moves this band ahead, the progress of its people, which means employment and education. I aim for a social standard on par with, or superior to, the white people. I am for settlement of the land claims.

CHIEF ARCHIE: The education of our youth.

CHIEF CLARENCE: Economic development, creating jobs and income for band and band members.

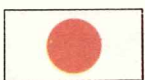
CHIEF BARNETT: I've been chief for a very long time (since 1962) and don't know what I've really achieved. A lot of my people are hard workers and we want to get on, on our own, not relying on what the government pays us.

2. Is there an "Indian Problem"? If so, what is it and what caused it?

CHIEF ALBERT: Yes. A combination of a lot of things, like the white education and value system being forced on the Indians. We Indians lean more towards spiritual values, the whites have made "the almighty dollar" come first.

CHIEF ROBERT: Yes. The number one pri-

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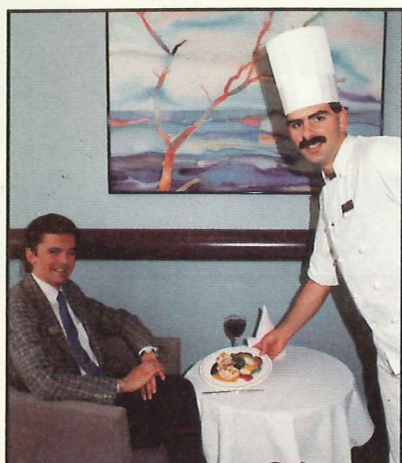


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ority for every Indian in Canada is a settlement of land claims. On the local level, our main problem is the housing shortage on the reserve, as we have many individuals wishing to move back. There is high unemployment among Indians and the average native salary is well below the poverty line. A serious economic problem lies with the delays of development financing, as lending banks must deal with the administrative bureaucracy in Ottawa. The Indian Act, drugs and alcohol and society's attitude towards Indians have all contributed to create the problem.

CHIEF ARCHIE: Yes. The problem has to do with things like recognition and respect. White society has given the Indians so many black eyes, telling us our ways were wrong, forced a white man's world on us, by the residential schools and by the apprehension during the 1950's and 1960's of Indian children, placing them in white foster homes.

CHIEF CLARENCE: Yes. The economy is now the main problem for the reserves. The white settlement didn't cause the problem, but the fact that the whites never lived up to the agreements they had made, did!

CHIEF BARNETT: Yes. The DIA (Department of Indian Affairs in Ottawa) never moved fast on us for all those years, and so conditioned us to not move fast, to do nothing for ourselves. So a lot of Indians gave up. Now we're struggling to undo this. It was a major fault that our people drank up all the cattle they had. When we weren't allowed liquor, we got it anyway, and when we were allowed to drink, we went overboard. A combination of things caused the problem, the Catholic priests came in and made us believe in God, when we had always prayed to our spiritual leader, and the residential schools took away our culture. I think our culture has begun to come back, though.

3. Has anything happened in the last few years to make you feel more optimistic?

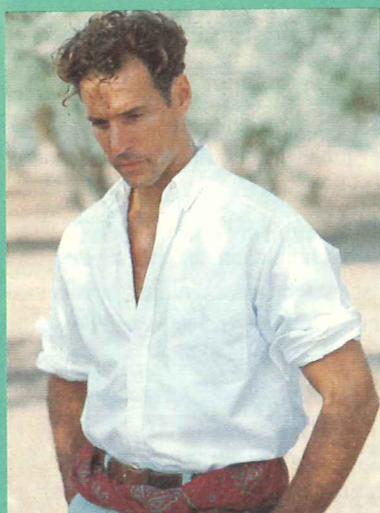
CHIEF ALBERT: A lot of non-Indians are getting interested, asking questions like "what is it that bothers the native people, what is the underlying reason for their wants?"

CHIEF ROBERT: We have moved ahead in many areas. Our band unemployment was 90 per cent three years ago, now we're down to 35 per cent and I aim for below 10 per cent within five years.

CHIEF ARCHIE: Last summer's demonstrations made a difference. I myself have always been optimistic.

CHIEF CLARENCE: Some recent federal announcements are positive. If they follow what's

For Men



been promised. There is also more public awareness of our problems.

CHIEF BARNETT: I wouldn't think so. In the north the land claims were rejected, so I don't think we're getting ahead. But we've got to try and keep our identity as aboriginal people.

4. What are your thoughts on self government and how do you envision it?

CHIEF ALBERT: At one time the Okanagan people were able to look after themselves and their territory. That was, and still is, our government. Today we must discuss how we can live with two governments, B.C. and Canada, whose rules and claims of land ownership we have never acknowledged.

CHIEF ROBERT: It simply means autonomy, setting and collecting taxes on the reserve, full control of lands and resources, our own police force, automatic representation on any Crown board etc. Our band is on its way.

CHIEF ARCHIE: We have our government in place and governed ourselves before, lived in harmony with nature and didn't exploit it the way white government does. Now we must keep up with white progress and educate our children to regain the self respect the white government took away by their handouts to us. And it's white man's problem that our monies today are eaten up by DIA salaries before we get it!

CHIEF CLARENCE: Totally controlling your own affairs is great. If that is what the band wants. I don't envision that. All I want is for bands here to achieve the level of control and authority tribes in the U.S. have, which is a level of decision-making we have far from reached. But federal laws, like Canada's criminal law, should stay.

CHIEF BARNETT: I haven't studied it too

much, I'm not educated, there's a lot of it I don't understand, like what "nation" is about. Maybe once the land claims were all put together, the talk of "nation" came about to gather more strength? Down here we're pretty well integrated with the white community, our kids go to white schools, and think the same way. Of course, we dream of putting in our own school one day...

5. How would you define a "reserve"? A place to keep whites out, or Indians in? Are reserves good or bad?

CHIEF ALBERT: A tract of land that in a way defines a barrier between Indians and whites, a zoo, a jail. Size has a lot to do with whether they're good or bad, as their limited land base prevented us from being well off. Governor Douglas had good intentions, but the surveyors he sent out didn't obey his orders to survey exactly what the

protect the Indians, when there weren't too many whites around. Now so many non-Indians are filling the country that they become interested in the reserves. Maybe they feel we have too much land? But my people raise cattle, we need elbow room. But as I said before, we're also pretty well integrated with the rest of the community by now.

6. What about the statement that Indians are genetically susceptible to drug and alcohol abuse? And the labelling of Indian employees as having "itchy moccasins"?

CHIEF ALBERT: I think there is some truth to it, but it's also a common human tendency to take the paved road, rather than the one with the bumps, when life goes against you. Also, because spiritual values decide our lifestyle, the clock at work won't keep us from leaving for a more important event with our people.

CHIEF ROBERT: Yes, I believe there is some medical evidence that Indians are more susceptible. The "itchy moccasin" syndrome is disappearing, as our band is profit oriented and treats jobs that way, with a steady increase in long term employees.

CHIEF ARCHIE: Alcohol doesn't go well with our inner system. Neither does milk! And we never had colds before white man arrived. Prior to World War II I'd say Indians were pretty dedicated employees, respected and wanted for their skills in seasonal jobs like fruit, ranching and logging. But there's something in our nature against being tied by a clock going around and around. The feeling of a new season is there, of wanting move on.

CHIEF CLARENCE: That there's some scientific reason for it is a myth I believe went out the window years ago! As for jobs, people always

For Women



Indians pointed out to them. Instead they surveyed far smaller areas for reserves and these lands were cut-off even more in the early 1900's.

CHIEF ROBERT: A tract of land set aside by the federal government for the use of Indians. TOTALLY GOVERNED by the Indians, but protected by the Crown. Reserves are both good and bad.

CHIEF ARCHIE: A place for our children to grow up, protected from the 'progress' of civilization. Reserves have been a help to us, but there was always a negative influence alongside and they are not a solution to the problems.

CHIEF CLARENCE: Reserves are the last remaining lands our forefathers reserved for our people. Who's kept in or out has nothing to do with it.

CHIEF BARNETT: They were set out to

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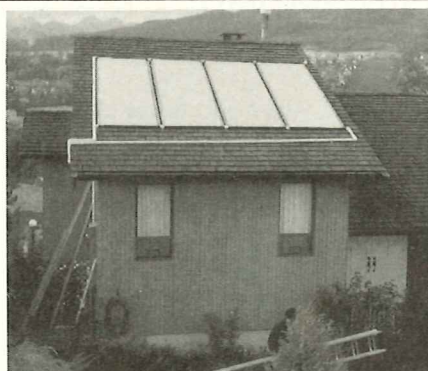
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develop stereotypes and prejudices that mean nothing.

CHIEF BARNETT: Indians are very free, maybe that has something to do with it. As far as a drinking problem goes, all of Canada seems to have one today.

CHIEF SLIM: Another word for "itchy moccasins" is "discrimination" and it always existed. The Indian gets the worst deal first, be it in logging, farming or whatever. I know and I've learnt to just walk off the job, ticked off.

7. What is society's most common misconception of Indians?

CHIEF ALBERT: Painting us all with the same brush, as uncivilized savages. I was in Toronto on Mother Earth Day this year, speaking to schools. And I stressed that we were never called "savages" until the whites wanted our land. Before that the gold seekers and fur traders paid the Indians well for the use of the trails etc.

CHIEF ROBERT: That every Indian is a lazy drunk only looking for handouts.

CHIEF ARCHIE: You see one drunk and lazy Indian, and you've seen them all, whereas a drunk and lazy white man is said "to have a problem".

CHIEF CLARENCE: That the land claims are a "money thing", when the real aim is to make the whites live up to their agreements. And that Indians get social services, like medicine, for nothing, when the fact is that they gave up land in return for those benefits.

8. What's your reply to those who suggest that what happened 100 years or more ago is water under the bridge and that the Indians should try to exist like any other Canadians?

CHIEF ALBERT: We're talking about past injustices that we still live under and that must be corrected in today's world, set in its way of dealing with native people.

CHIEF ROBERT: The Indians have been here for 10,000 years and will stay for another 10,000. We can work side by side, but we're different spiritually and that has to be respected.

CHIEF ARCHIE: What was done to my great grandfather is still here, inside me, and I'll fight for it. I'll probably die before the next generation may be able to give the wanted reply.

CHIEF BARNETT: It's our blood, we've been so frustrated, it's not in the past, it's now, and our only way to change things is to go back to the beginnings.

9. What is white man's biggest fault?

CHIEF ALBERT: Greed.

CHIEF ROBERT: Greed.

CHIEF ARCHIE: That he values the almighty dollar before the land.

CHIEF CLARENCE: Changing his established laws to suit himself. The whites haven't lived up to the laws this country was founded on and never applied "respect and dignity" to Indian people.

CHIEF SLIM: He doesn't know enough, why else would he allow all the immigrants to this country?

10. What did you think of "Dances With Wolves"?

CHIEF ALBERT: I saw it twice, an excellent film. The Indians were played by Indians, not by Mexicans. For once a movie showed our lifestyle, what we were doing between the wagon attacks! It did more justice to our people than the DIA in all its existence!

CHIEF SLIM: It's pretty good. You can see that it is a show, but at least it's a change that they brought some GOOD into the Indian!

11. Please name your favorite bird, flower, tree, and animal, and why?

CHIEF ALBERT: The loon, for its beautiful evening songs. The sunflower for its freshness and abundance in spring, the beginning of a new season. The cedar for the fragrance of its boughs, for being native and for helping my people survive by

using cedar for fires, canoes, baskets and clothing. The deer for being a native food source, timid, gentle, harmless and inquisitive.

CHIEF ROBERT: The eagle, for symbolizing Indian ways, free, majestic, strong, and bold. That small flower with roots of white potatoes (probably "bitterroot") that grew abundantly in our dry hills and helped my people survive. It's symbolic in that it's hard to find now. The blue spruce because it's so plush and stays green! And the deer for being a native food source, wild, free, and pretty to look at.

CHIEF ARCHIE: The red-tailed hawk, for being everywhere I travel. The sunflower for being all around me and the first sign of spring. The pine for being all around me. The horse because I raise and ride them.

CHIEF CLARENCE: The eagle, our traditional bird. I like all flowers. The pine because it's native to this area. The deer for being a native food source.

CHIEF BARNETT: The chickadee, it doesn't eat as much as the eagle! The lupins for being so pretty when they bloom in the hills in the spring. The Douglas fir. The horse, because I've ridden one for transportation before cars came around

and it's still the only way to work cattle.

CHIEF SLIM: I like all birds, so nice to see them return each spring. And all the blossoms of springtime. For a tree, a good shade tree! And the horse, because

I've known them since I can remember and respect them for their value to us, both then and today.

12. How would you describe complete happiness?

CHIEF ALBERT: Seeing my family with smiling faces. Dying and going to the happy hunting grounds.

CHIEF ROBERT: A complete and happy family life.

CHIEF ARCHIE: To be young again!

CHIEF CLARENCE: Our people totally educated, academically and vocationally, equally strong in cultural Indian ways and contemporary skills.

CHIEF BARNETT: Every time spring comes back and you know you made it for another year. And rodeo!

CHIEF SLIM: Waking up in the morning. Having the grandchildren pretty near you. I'm happy every day! ■

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