

# The Life of a Chief

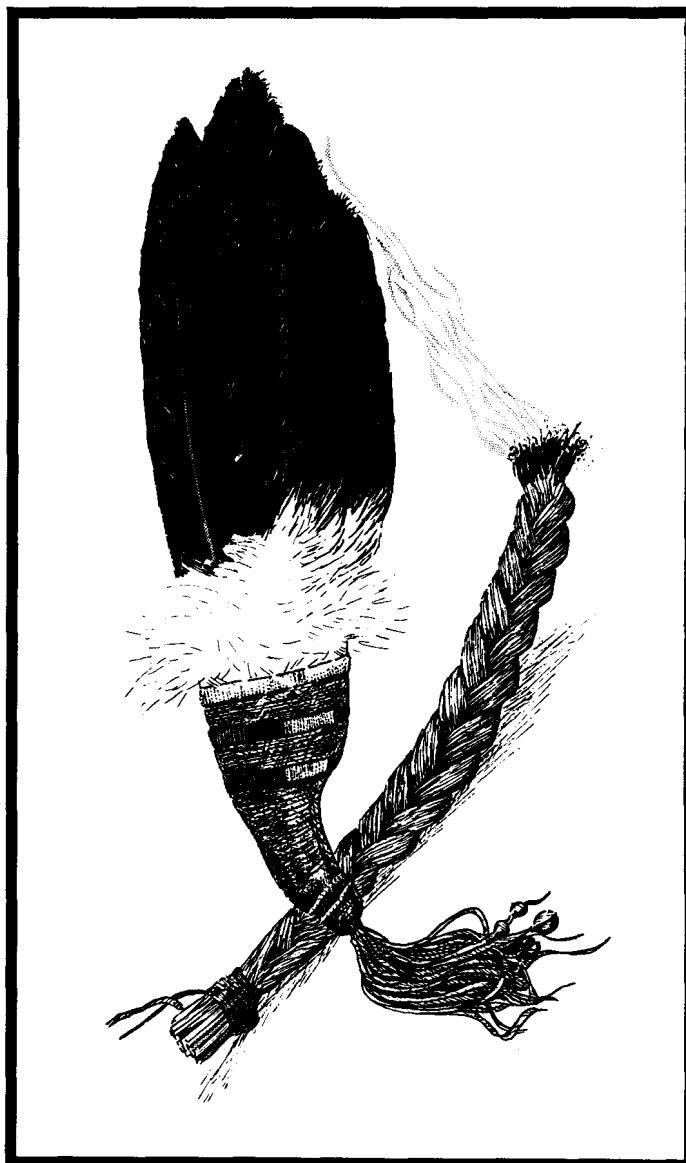
*An Interview with Nora Bothwell*

**N**ora Bothwell is Chief of the Alder-ville First Nation, a community of two hundred and fifty Missis-sauga Indians located on the shores of Rice Lake in southeastern Ontario.

Nora lost membership in her band on her marriage to a non-Indian and was reinstated following passage of Bill C-31 amending the Indian Act in 1985. She was elected Chief in 1987. Nora holds a certificate in Native Economic Development and Small Business Management and a Bachelor of Arts degree in Native Studies. She talked to *Canadian Woman Studies* about her life experience and her work as Chief.

*Have you always been interested in politics?*

No. Believe me, no, but it grows on you. I always worked in the community, even when I was growing up. I was brought up around older people, at the west end of the reserve, and I carried in wood and water for neighbours. My mom was a single parent.



Helping and sharing was part of everyday life. Then when I married and became non-status I became an underdog. At the time I married I didn't understand the implications of no longer being "Indian." I continued to work in the community, but it angered me when I saw job postings which said "must be a band member." I can see making Native ancestry a preferred requirement for a job but lots of our people out there are resourceful and qualified and if they came home they could make a real contribution. I know what it is to be on the reserve and have resources available to me and I also know what it is to be on the other side. I got my education while I was non-status and grants weren't available to me. That all helps me now to understand and make decisions as a result of looking at all sides of an issue.

*You went back to school as a mature student. What motivated you to do that?*

I first went to Sir Sandford Fleming College to take a refresher course in bookkeep-

ing. My goal was to become a book-keeper. I worked for a couple of summers, one summer at the college, and I enjoyed meeting people, but sitting behind a desk, typing, was not for me. It wasn't lively enough. The turning point for me came when I enrolled in the Native Economic Development and Small Business Management Program in 1982. It was a one-year program sponsored by the Metis and non-status Indian organization in this zone and students were supported by the Local Employment Assistance Program of C.E.I.C. I was really interested in the community development part of the course and I found it easy to understand. I could identify with what was being taught because I could see how the instructor's experience out west corresponded to what I had seen at Alderville. My community development instructor encouraged me to on to further education. I said "Oh no. I'm too dumb." But he told me "Determination is what counts."

I enrolled at Trent University in Native Studies, but only after thinking about it for several months and talking it over with my kids. My daughter was eleven and my son was four when I went back to school in 1982.

*How did you manage as a single parent?*

I had a great mother. If it wasn't for her I would never have been able to make it with babysitting costs. There have been tough times. It wasn't easy to go to school and then come home and do all the things that you have to do, keep the house, do the laundry, feed your kids and read them a bedtime story, and make sure they got a little part of you, and then start doing your homework.

Night courses were the worst. I used to be perturbed when I would drive fifty miles through a storm to get to class and students living right in Peterborough couldn't make it. Then I would think: "But I'm the one who is going to gain for this."

I am lucky that I have determination. When I make a decision I stick by it, and having a goal in mind is like seeing the light at the end of the tunnel. And when you get to the end of that tunnel there is another tunnel, so there are never-ending tunnels. But that's O.K. because you just go one tunnel at a time.

*Tell us about a day in the life of a chief.*

My day often starts with the phone ringing; someone needs something or wants to meet me at the office. Then there are the kids to get off to school. I am usually at the administration office by 9:00 a.m. three or four days a week. I get the mail at 10:00 and there is always a lot of correspondence that has to be done. I keep an open door and make myself available if people want to drop in. I am especially pleased when older members of the community come in and talk about what they would like to see happen here.

Letters and other communications with government could be a daily activity. For example, this past week I was tracking down the person in the Department of Indian Affairs who was responsible for a survey on the success of post-secondary students. When D.I.A. asked our opinion on the terms of reference for the survey, I wrote saying the information available was not satisfactory, but they went ahead and called our students directly. They had no right to question our students without permission of Chief and Council, but by the time I reached the woman in charge of evaluation, the telephone survey had already been carried out and the woman in

charge had never seen my letter objecting to the process.

Your people don't know about the day-to-day work you do and it is difficult to put out information in a positive manner. It is important for people to know how they are affected by the political process, so they will take an interest in what goes on. For example, a lot of our people don't understand treaties. In our last newsletter I went over very briefly how each treaty refers to us at Alderville, leaving it open that anyone interested in learning more could find information at the administration office. One person did follow up on it.

I'm trying to digest the Indian Act and in my spare time I am going through documents on land issues. We have had land taken from the reserve over the years and we don't know whether or not it was taken honestly.

We are working on developing a resource centre and library for our young people, and one of our women is taking training to manage that. Someday, in our plans, there will be a museum, and we are in the feasibility stage of a community centre.

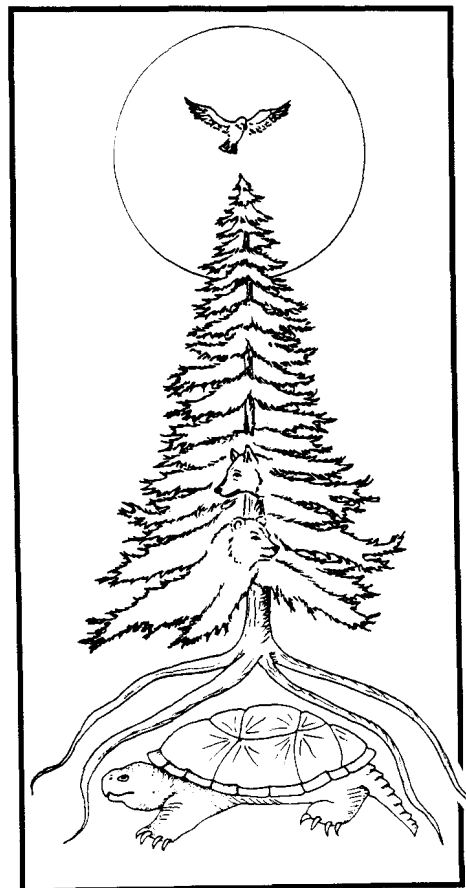
Those are day-to-day things that come up. We are meeting tomorrow with a consultant who is doing a land use study for the reserve.

*Is there reserve land not being used at present?*

Yes. As a council we are trying to see what would be the best use of land owned by the Band. There is some agricultural land which you can rent out, but the income is small. We obtained a grant to hire a forestry technician who did soil samples. He will work with the land use consultant to plot the land and give Council advice on the best site for new housing, instead of everyone building just anywhere.

We have lakefront property and a park. Over the years there has been no planning done, whether to have holding tanks for water, or setting boundaries for building sites. With the passage of Bill C-31 we have had a lot of people come back to the reserve. They want lots, and they should rightfully have them, but where will we put them? Council has passed a by-law establishing lot sizes and we are having a surveyor come in this spring.

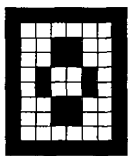
*It sounds like Council is working towards*



having a development plan.

We eventually want to have the plan up on the wall. Here is the reserve. Here is what we would like to see. We have been drawing up by-laws and policies. The reality is that even though you are on a reserve, there are certain rules that have to be observed. We have had community meetings to discuss proposed changes, and of course there were people who didn't come. So we are hearing rebuttals from some. It takes a lot of work to put new policies in place.

*The media report on chiefs meetings discussing self-government. How does that connect with the local concerns you've been talking about?*



Self-government means that we are supposed to have control over our own services and resources. Right now we don't even have a real consultation. What happens nine times out of ten is that government presents a policy, a draft policy they call it, and they don't listen to what we say, just as the evaluator I spoke about earlier didn't listen when I said "No! this survey is unacceptable," How can a researcher decide whether one of our students is successful? She may not have graduated from a college or university, but she could still take something from the course and do something valuable in our eyes. Whose standard of success is going to be applied?

Communities are supposed to be able to establish their own membership codes under Bill C-31 but we have already been notified that the federal government will pay for local services only for those members who qualify under the Indian Act. If we at Alderville have all our people back without restrictions, we will always have a community. If we abide by Indian Act regulations, some families, including my own, perhaps, will disappear from the community in two generations. We need economic development so that we can make the choice for ourselves.

*Do you think you could have been a Chief six or eight years ago?*

No, because I really didn't have any goals, formal education or most importantly, the self-confidence. I know that basically I always wanted to help my

people. I just didn't know how to go about it.

*What helped prepare you for your present responsibilities?*

That first community development course was where I started to take hold. I learned a lot from interacting with students in the small business course, but even when I went to Trent I wasn't sure where I was going. Interacting at university with Native students from all over the country made me realize that the problems on my reserve weren't any different than anyone else's problems. I began to think: "Wow! Maybe I could change that. Maybe I could be the one."

So fine, you can sit there and talk 'til you're blue in the face, but what are you going to do about it? You come home and get involved in the community, because you care. Caring is a grassroots value that I learned from my mom and that she learned from her mom.

During the summers while I was a student and after I graduated, I worked with status, non-status and non-Native women to set up and incorporate a crafts cooperative at home. Through my formal education I learned how to plan, how to research, and most important, how to delegate responsibility. I used to be on committees and do everything, but I learned in community development that if people are going to grow, they have to make their own mistakes. This is important, to let them go, but there must be a guide.

The co-op still operates in the summer season. We have talked about enlarging the business, but like in any organization, people move on. One of the lessons we learned was that when you start something and teach people things, they leave to do other things. You are left with a new core, so you always have to be teaching.

*That's a useful insight. Instead of bemoaning the fact that people you train move on, you gear up for the change and keep teaching new generations of organization members.*

Native women traditionally were the teachers. I believe that they have to be initiators and motivators as well. Women

have the quality that they can do a hundred things at once. You have to when you have kids and have to run a household on a limited budget. Women can push. If it weren't for women taking the initiative, we wouldn't have our status back.

*Are there sacrifices involved in doing the things you have done?*

You bet! You're never really free because if you are really committed you will give up your time. If someone calls on a week-end and says "Nora, I need help with this," I am there because I feel it's my duty. You don't realize until you get into the position what a responsibility it is. You have to be respected and you also have to take a lot of criticism, not always to your face! But that's O.K. If people talk, you know you are doing something.

I've put a lot of stress on my kids. My daughter has taken a lot on herself. She can control the whole household. She is talking about going into a law and security program at college, or she may go into social work. My son is more sports-minded.

*What would you say are the qualities necessary for a young person who wants to make a contribution to the community, perhaps in a position of leadership?*

I didn't set out to be a chief, but I knew I could do something because I was determined. So I think you have to be determined. You have to have goals. You have

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to be able to share. And you have to be patient. I keep a turtle with me wherever I go as a reminder. People don't always accept change. However, I feel that through communication with your community members, through giving insights into problems, etc. and how we intend to deal with them, one can make things happen in Indian country. Most importantly, you must always stress that "this is your community and the future depends on you, so get out there and get involved."

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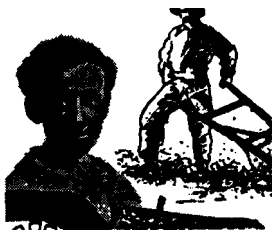
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