

was frustrating



—Al Scarth photo

VERY LITTLE ENGLISH IS SPOKEN UNTIL THE CHILDREN GO TO SCHOOL

This dubious student found her Dustbin in the form of Rocky Mountain House, and her reserve was Sunchild O'Chiese, 40 miles north-west of there. The people on this reserve are Plains, Cree and Chippewa Indians; most originated in Saskatchewan or in Montana. Treaty Indians since 1950, these native peoples' families moved south and west rather than face the encroaching white society.

The same year the treaty was signed, Mennonite missionaries moved into the area and founded a school. These people were as concerned about the physical welfare of the Indians as they were about their spiritual welfare, and also founded a store and, later, a fuel station. In 1950, most of the native people had only wagons and horses, and the trip to town and back took several days. Very little English was spoken until the school began, and even now there are a number of older people who speak no English. However this far south it is impossible to escape cultural influence, and now most families have access to some sort of motorized vehicle. It is not unusual to see one of these curious contraptions lurch to a stop on the main street of town and spew out 15 or 16 grinning Indians. There is evidently some sort of secret to it,

like getting teen-agers in a phone booth.

Dwellings on this reserve are usually wood frame two-or-three-room homes. A few have the conveniences of plumbing and electricity, but there are no stoves other than the ancient cast-iron variety that crackle cheerily when stoked to their blackened tops with moss-fragrant wood.

In summer there is a mass exodus, and it seems to be a status symbol if you're one of the first to have your tent erected. Houses are deserted for the open air, bed is a blanket on the cold ground and heat comes from a tiny tin stove with detachable stove-pipe.

THE SUMMER

Summer is a season for working, for moving when and where the Fates shall lead, for hunting moose and elk and curing their hides, for parades, rodeos, Sundances, powwows and Indian Days from Fort McMurray to the 49th parallel. Summer is the time for nomadic practices to take over, for white teachers to retreat to their recuperation stations, for missionaries to take holidays, for kids to run bare-bottomed and unshod, free from the imposed routine of harsh winter. Sugar beets are planted and harvest-

ed near Lethbridge, farmers' crops are sown and reaped, rails are cut and stripped, wood is stored, money is made—and spent.

And Sunchild summer is a time for religion, too. A man dreams of putting on a Sundance. He tells last year's host, who passes down to him the secrets of Sundance. A lodge is erected, made from poles cut in a ceremony. The tribe brings cloths to honour the lodge, and the men pray, "Thunderbird, come and rest upon our centre pole." The dancers perform from sunup until sunset, eating no food, drinking no water. The sound of the drums sings over the reserve, unceasing for two days and nights.

Then the circle of tents disintegrates into past, and the only religious festivals for the rest of the year are small groups of Native American Church people, who meet in a tipi, glowing orange in the night, and meditate, taking peyote and singing softly until dawn.

A DRINKER?

But what of the other side of the Indian? What about the drinking, the guy who doesn't work, the welfare dole, the kids who get neglected or mistreated?

Is this reserve a Utopia, free from the problems of other reserves?

No, the problems are there, but not every family suffers from them. In fact, an overall view of the Sunchild O'Chiese reserve makes it seem like a pretty good place to be. Would it not be better for these people to relearn self-sufficiency in their inherent environment than to place them in a city where alcoholism, welfare and hopelessness are almost certain fates?

Eugene Steinhauer, a Cree Indian of the Native Peoples' Communications says, "What my people need is to be taught by their own people in their native tongue. I see no hope for assimilation of native people into white culture."

What place does the intercultural student have in this conglomerate of impressions? In all likelihood he was sent out on an errand of teaching, but by the end of his session he realizes it was learning—all learning.

So his kindergarten failed, so no-one turned up for his art classes, so he didn't know what an education survey was. If he makes his career working with Indian and Metis people, he'll know what he's getting into. He'll have some understanding of the people he's working with.

If he decides not to, he'll know why.