

# The problem . . .



## Do they need education to stay out of our culture?

By MARJORIE BELL

Adam's six-pack bounced crazily on the seat of the battered, springless Pontiac as I guided it between massive ruts on the Sunchild forestry road.

"I'm not going to let my kids go to school after grade eight," he informed me.

"Why?"

"If they get a good education, they won't appreciate me."

Adam had defined in one simple statement the problem I had found nebulous, frustrating and undefinable all summer.

There IS an Indian problem, as any 9-5 dry-martini, 2½-kids Canadian will tell you. What he doesn't know is that somewhere in the bowels of this giant learning complex, someone is trying to do something constructive about it.

In a society where labels and/or misnomers are conventional symbols, we call it Intercultural Education. In the university it is a lacing of sociological, anthropological and linguistic theory supplementing the usual methods and curriculum courses. The step between the ivory tower of learning and the nitty-gritty of teaching a minority group of culturally different people is a series of seminars.

But for about a dozen people each year, the real learning begins when the university term ends, and there they are, on reserves 50 miles of rough road away from Dustbin, Alberta on the dubious errand of serving summer practicums.

The practicum student is generally wide-eyed, over-dressed and either reduced to gibbering idiocy or stunned into silence by fear upon arrival.

He struggles through the summer, vacillating between hopeless depression upon wondering what the hell he's doing here, and the elation of having the confidence of some shy child or sharing a joke with his age peers. He eats elk meat and bannock with a councillor and his family, or drinks syrup-sweet tea from a tin cup and tells a story in sign language to a deaf woman.

He walks for miles, gets in and out of scrapes, makes friends and learns enough of the language that the native people can laugh at his sad efforts.

He learns that the education survey he was supposed to do, or the kindergarten or recreational program he was supposed to start, was a cover-up job, because you have to have a defined job before the boys in Ottawa will pay you, and how do you explain to them that you're here to learn about Indians?

And at the end of it all he begins to wonder if education is what these people really need, and to think that assimilation into our insane culture is the worst solution to the problem.

### BACK AT UNIVERSITY

Suddenly the summer is over and he's back at university, chewing chiclets, smoking tailor-mades, curtailing cursing, spitting prohibited.

And he can't wait for next summer.

### Background

Last spring a handful of U of A students met in the Department of Indian Affairs office for a three-day cram session of what to expect when one teaches for the first time on an Indian reserve.

Some were returning for a second term, but most had had no experience with teaching or living with Indian people. Three days of orientation in a plush office was the only culture-shock padding the students had before each was launched out on his own, to make the scene from Morley to Fox Lake.

Each student was in a unique situation. Some were within 10 miles of a city. Others had to be flown in. Attitudes toward education varied from apathy to acceptance, and the students' tasks varied from art and recreation classes to education surveys. Students worked closely with Service Corps, Community Development officers, chiefs, councillors and children. Summer was a series of challenges and frustrations.

Almost all of these people are now back at university, specializing in Intercultural Education. Their tuition is paid by the Department of Indian Affairs in exchange for a year of service during the actual school term upon graduation or certification.

Here is one Intercultural Education student's impressions of a unique summer.