

Native Issues Week: A new perspective

by Gilbert Bouchard

"Native Issues Week", in a series of speakers and films, addressed the deficiencies in native schooling, the assimilation of the Indian people, and current scholastic endeavors in the preservation of Louis Riel's writings.

The week, last Tuesday to Friday, was sponsored by the External Affairs Board (a board of the Students' Union), and involved five speakers and three films.

The speakers included: Theresa Wildcat, on native education; Claude Rocan, on the Riel project; Vern Douglas, on the Sacred Circle Education Program of the Edmonton School Board; Dr. Joe Couture, on the conflicting views and expectations of formal native studies programs; and Carl Urion, on native studies and their relation to land and language concerns.

Theresa Wildcat, a prominent voice in Indian education, founder of the Muskweches Cultural College, former member of the U of A Senate, and currently drafting the Erminskine Band Constitution, spoke Tuesday addressing primarily the importance of Indian involvement in education; education as a means of elevating the Indians' quality of life; and education as a means of preserving Indian culture.

Wildcat commenced by recognizing both the lack of priority given to education by Indian bands, and the need for a certain level of assimilation, as she put it "a culturization is needed but must be handled with care and knowledge."

She continued pointing out the movement to a bicultural/bilingual Indian community, with natives turning more and more to community control of education.

Muskweches college for example is collecting historical

tapes in both English and Cree recording Cree history, as well as providing University level courses for native students. The college also produces "Cree Way", a program offering interested schools knowledge of the Cree language and culture, as well as an outdoor education program.

Wildcat stressed the importance of education as a cultural experience, "Indian students must be told about their culture and the impact of that culture upon the world."

She concluded by mentioning that parents should set goals for their children and that education should "reinforce Indian identity, and allow Indians to obtain training to make a good living in the twentieth century society."

Wednesday's speaker was Claude Rocan, Project Coordinator for the Riel Project.

The Riel Project, a bilingual publication, will collect all of Riel's writings, no matter how trivial, and will make no qualitative assessments. The five volumes will contain all his poetry and prose writing as well as an index, and a few essays on Riel's style.

The project began in 1978 after a Western Canadian Publications Project (WCPP) poll concluded that Louis Riel's writings were the most inaccessible documents in Western Canadian scholarship.

Rocan commented on the project's "thousands of letter and requests" sent for documents and the tremendous task of collecting, editing, indexing, and finally publishing the works of man who scattered his papers "across almost every province and several states."

Rocan wrapped up his talk by mentioning that the work would also be significant because of Riel's musings on the Indian People and their status.



by Cathy McLaughlin

"Improved education for and about natives" is the goal of a new native studies program in the Edmonton Public School system.

Vern Douglas, coordinator of Sacred Circle Studies, said a previous program "ended up reinforcing too many stereotypes."

"Sacred Circle focusses on the academic, social and cultural needs of native children in the school system."

The program has eight parts. The first of these, Curriculum Development, seeks to improve teaching materials now used in native culture study. Workers handle research, photography and writing with funds from Alberta Education.

A second component, Home-School Liaison, brings parents, schools and the native community closer together.

"Parents are often victims of the old residential school systems...They harbor mistrust from past experiences in the schools."

Parents meet with counsellors as well as native elders, to get in touch with traditional roots often lost in the city. A legal society and a Cree language class in the Norwood area are other facets of the program.

"We're seeing men and women in their late forties involved for the first time in political or community activities."

To aid in making the community connection, Oliver School hosts a native resource center, the program's third component. Books, sample curriculums, theses, native newspapers and educational material are in the center for use.

Back in the schools, Sacred Circle is looking for a "native studies consultant" to work with teachers and students in "integrating the native perspective into the classroom."

"We want the traditional aspect stressed."

Douglas cited literature as a starting point in such an integration plan: "Maria Campbell's novel *Halfbreed*, for example, could be used in English studies."

In keeping with this, a Lead Teacher Project brings fifteen teachers together one afternoon per week for "cross-cultural awareness training." These are sessions in cultural immersion.

"Most of these people had no idea of the traditional perspective at all."

Cultural people talk to the teachers; together they work on curriculum units. Douglas hopes by 1985 thirty more schools will be participating.

"We need people working together."

Four Cree grandmothers work in the sixth part of the program, the teacher aide sector.

"The aides provide a positive adult native role model."

The women break down stereotypes, especially in city core schools where students often see only the natives on skid row.

For native students in these schools, three one-week summer camps are on schedule this year at Muriel Lake.

"This is not a treatment camp."

Cultural activities for native children are the focus here. For those who can pay, the camp costs one hundred dollars per week. Welfare and social assistance will help some students.

"We will subsidize those who can't afford the camp. Liaison officers in the schools will identify these kids."

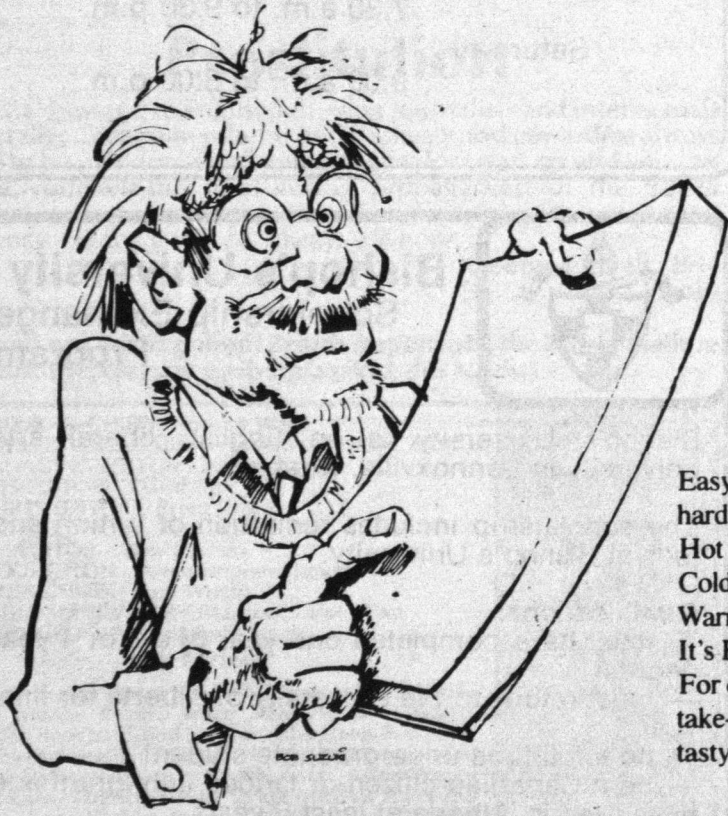
The last segment of the program, the Native Cross-Cultural Awareness, Education and Training Seminar, is a workshop for school administrators, teachers and counsellors.

"Last time it worked out tremendously."

Cultural activities, again, are the focus: elders and members of the native community meet with and train the participants.

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