

## John Laurie and the Indian Association of Alberta

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When he passed away in 1959, Calgary high school teacher and bachelor John Laurie had served fifteen years as secretary of the Indian Association of Alberta (IAA), one of Alberta's early formal Indian political unions (plates 1 and 2). Over the course of those years as secretary, Laurie travelled extensively, attending IAA meetings throughout Alberta and even venturing to Ottawa several times to present IAA petitions to the Department of Indian Affairs. He also generated volumes of correspondence outlining the social and economic issues affecting Alberta's Indian population, and he forged links between Alberta's Indian communities and the Canadian state. Finally, John Laurie enjoyed photography. With his camera, Laurie captured images of friends, the IAA and events on Alberta Indian reserves in the 1940s and 1950s. Today, these photographs provide us with his highly personal views of prairie Indian political and social activity during the war and immediate post-war years.

The IAA came into existence in Alberta at the end of the 1930s. The fledgling political union passed its first constitution in 1939 and represented a continuation of the pioneering political activity carried out by the League of Indians of Western Canada.<sup>1</sup> The League had been attempting to organize Indian peoples on the prairies into a single union since 1921; however, by the late 1930s personal disagreements between Saskatchewan and Alberta Indian leaders involved in the League led to the creation of separate political organizations in Alberta and Saskatchewan. In 1939 Métis organizer Malcolm F. Norris joined his relative, John Callihoo of Michel's Reserve, in writing the first constitution for the Indian Association of Alberta. In the eyes of its new leadership, the primary function of the IAA was to assert Indian treaty rights and improve the position of Indian peoples in Alberta through provincial union. In a letter to members on the Blackfoot reserve (Siksika First Nation) in 1944, Norris reaffirmed this ideal, stating the purpose of the IAA to be "the betterment of their [Indian members'] social and economic conditions as promised under Proclamation and Treaties made with them by representatives of his Majesty's governments. . . ."<sup>2</sup>

Though the IAA was initially supported primarily by Indian peoples in the Saddle Lake, Edmonton and Hobbema agencies, by 1944 membership expanded to the Stoney reserve west of Calgary, and the IAA executive made concerted efforts to bring reserves in southern and northern Alberta into the organization. After 1944, with the appointment of John Laurie as IAA secretary, non-Indian involvement with the IAA also increased.<sup>3</sup> Laurie was well connected to members of the Conservative and CCF parties in Ottawa and Edmonton, and used these connections to benefit the IAA. Laurie also rallied local citizens groups to assist the IAA, including home and school associations, the Friends of the Indian society, farmers' unions and church groups. By gaining the support of non-Indians for the IAA, Laurie felt he was helping Indian peoples achieve equality within Canadian society.

One of the main hurdles IAA organizers faced in attempting to unite Indian peoples in Alberta into a single provincial union was the size of the province. Throughout the war years, gasoline rationing and the expense of maintaining automobiles prevented extensive contact between reserves in the province. In addition, Indian peoples across the province were also party to different treaties and were concerned about different issues, both of which further hindered their unification. Despite these difficulties, the IAA executive successfully expanded the IAA membership by travelling to and corresponding with bands across the province. By 1945 the IAA boasted membership in twenty-six bands in both southern and northern Alberta, and even one in British Columbia.<sup>4</sup>

In the 1940s several factors contributed to the growth of the IAA. First and foremost the poor state of many reserve communities in Alberta stimulated Indian people to join the IAA in seeking solutions to this problem. The IAA petitioned Ottawa to increase its support for destitute families, to have funds obtained through the newly instituted *Family Allowances Act* (1944) made more accessible to Indian mothers and their children, and it regularly made inquiries to Ottawa about the status of Indian war veterans' benefits.<sup>5</sup> Immediately after the war, the IAA strove to have Alberta's Indian population included in Canada's post-war reconstruction and rehabilitation programs.

Secondly, dissatisfaction in Indian communities with the restrictive nature of the *Indian Act* also stimulated support for the IAA. The *Indian Act* severely limited many aspects of Indian peoples' lives, and the IAA represented an opportunity to pressure government revision of the act. As a result of its petitions to Ottawa, the IAA was allowed to make submissions to the Special Joint Committee of the Senate and House of Commons

appointed to investigate the *Indian Act* in 1946. In 1947, a team of IAA members travelled to Ottawa for this purpose (plates 3 and 4).

Thirdly, the IAA gained support in Indian communities across the province when it challenged Indian Affairs's attempts to revise band lists and expel individuals deemed non-status from reserves. The IAA questioned Ottawa's exclusion of certain individuals from treaty lists and sought redress for those individuals threatened with removal from their reserves.<sup>6</sup>

As Laurie's photographs reveal, IAA meetings were well attended (plates 5, 6, 7 and 8). IAA locals met on their own reserves, and annual conventions provided the opportunity for all locals to gather, pass important resolutions to be presented to the Alberta and federal governments, and elect a new executive. Meetings were held both on and off reserve, and feasts were often a highlight of the larger meetings (plate 9). For the annual convention, women of the hosting reserve would spend up to a year preparing for the arrival of the hungry IAA membership to their community.<sup>7</sup>

Though John Laurie was officially connected to the IAA as secretary, he was also personally connected to many IAA members. One of Laurie's closest friends in the IAA was Chief David Crowchild, of the Sarcee (Tsuu T'ina First Nation) reserve (plates 10 and 11). Crowchild succeeded Laurie as secretary of the IAA and both men worked together closely within the organization. When Laurie suffered the first of a series of heart attacks, it was Crowchild and his wife Daisy who nursed him back to health at their home.<sup>8</sup> The photographs Laurie took of Chief Crowchild and his family certainly reveal their close relationship.

In addition to the Crowchild family, Laurie was also associated with the Hunter family from the Stoney reserve. Laurie apparently met the family through his involvement with the reserve's United Church minister.<sup>9</sup> Laurie assisted Eddie Hunter with music lessons and eventually helped the teenager attend Crescent Heights High School in Calgary (plate 12). In 1940, Eddie's father, Chief Enos Hunter of the Wesley Band, adopted Laurie as his own son. Through this adoptive family, Laurie was often involved with events on the Stoney reserve such as Sundances and school openings (plates 13, 14, 15 and 16), and Laurie encouraged the Stoney residents to become involved in the IAA.

In addition to the time he spent with the people in reserve communities, Laurie also regularly attended special annual events with IAA supporters, such as the Calgary Stampede and Banff Indian Days (plates 17 and 18), revealing the extent to which politics were an integral rather than exceptional part of reserve communities both before and after the Second World War. Venues like these provided opportunities for Indian peoples from around the



province to exchange ideas about issues confronting them. These same events also marked times when non-Indians who supported the IAA gathered to discuss Indian issues.<sup>10</sup>

John Laurie's commitment to the IAA was complete, though he sometimes differed with other IAA members on the question of the association's ultimate purpose. Judging by his extensive writings, it seems Laurie felt the IAA would provide Indian peoples with an opportunity to become familiar with the democratic process and the Canadian state system—the IAA would educate Indian people. In addition, he felt that no Indian union would be taken seriously unless it conformed to Euro-Canadian standards of political activism. In his own words, "Unless there is a proper organization with responsible elected officers the department will pay absolutely no attention."<sup>11</sup> Finally, Laurie also felt that having non-Indians involved with the IAA would give it greater credibility and influence. On this last point he differed with Saskatchewan Indian leader and political activist, John Tootoosis, who was very much opposed to using "outside help." Whether Laurie saw himself as a non-Indian supporter or as an Indian member of the IAA is unclear: at times he presented himself as having Aboriginal ancestry, though he never substantiated this claim.

Ultimately, Laurie's photographs represent his personal perspective of Indian political activity in Alberta during and just after the Second World War. These images not only reveal small details about IAA meetings in the early years of its operation and the individuals who pioneered the organization, they also reflect the communal effort the IAA embodied, the IAA's involvement with the federal government and, finally, the personal connection its first secretary had with people he served.

## Notes

- 1 For more information on the League of Indians of Western Canada see Stan Cuthand, "The Native Peoples of the Prairie Provinces in the 1920s and 1930s," in *One Century Later*, edited by D.B. Smith and I.A. Getty (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1978), pp. 31–42.
- 2 Murray Dobbin private papers, Malcolm F. Norris to Ben Calfrobe, 13 September 1944. In collection of author.
- 3 John Laurie was allowed membership in IAA as a "special case"; though he was perceived as non-Indian in his correspondence, he often claimed Indian ancestry.
- 4 Bands included in the IAA in 1945 were from reserves at Hobbema, Winterburn, Saddle Lake, Brocket, Lac Ste. Anne, Riviere Qui Barre, Cold Lake, Frog Lake, Kehewin, Sarcee, Lesser Slave Lake, and Ft. Nelson, BC. See Murray Dobbin private papers, John Laurie to Mr. G.H. Castelden, M.P., 26 February 1945.
- 5 See John Laurie Fonds, M656, Glenbow Archives, Calgary, file 1, 2, 3, 4, which contain numerous letters written in the 1940s dealing with issues such as veteran's rights, family allowances and pensions.

- 6 See John Laurie Fonds, M656, Glenbow Archives, Calgary, file 1. The IAA took on the cases of various individuals threatened with removal from their reserve; their most prominent attempt resulted in the Hobbema case of 1956.
- 7 Interview by author with Hugh and Pauline Dempsey, Calgary, February 1995.
- 8 Don Smith, "A Good Samaritan" in *Citymakers*, edited by Max Foran and Sheilagh S. Jameson (Calgary: The Historical Society of Alberta), pp. 263-74, 271.
- 9 Smith, p. 267; also John Laurie Fonds, M656, Glenbow Archives, Calgary, file 22, containing Laurie's unpublished manuscript of aspects of IAA history.
- 10 John Laurie met with individuals such as Norman Luxton, founder of the Banff Indian Days, and George Gooderham of Indian Affairs at these annual events. Both men supported the IAA.
- 11 John Laurie Fonds, M656, Glenbow Archives, file 2, John Laurie to Johnny Callihoo, Villeneuve, AB, 11 April 1945.

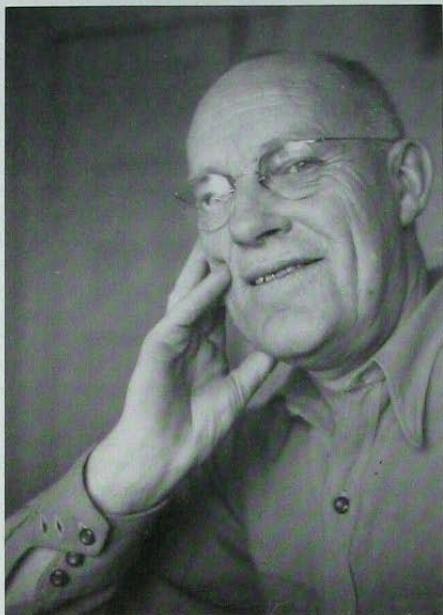


Plate 1: John Laurie, 1953



Plate 2: John Laurie posing for a portrait in his buckskin outfit at his Calgary home. He was given the name White Cloud by the community of the Stoney reserve, west of Calgary.



Plate 3: David Crowchild and Teddy Yellowfly, members of the IAA, en route in 1947 to the Ottawa hearings of the Special Joint Committee created to investigate the *Indian Act*.



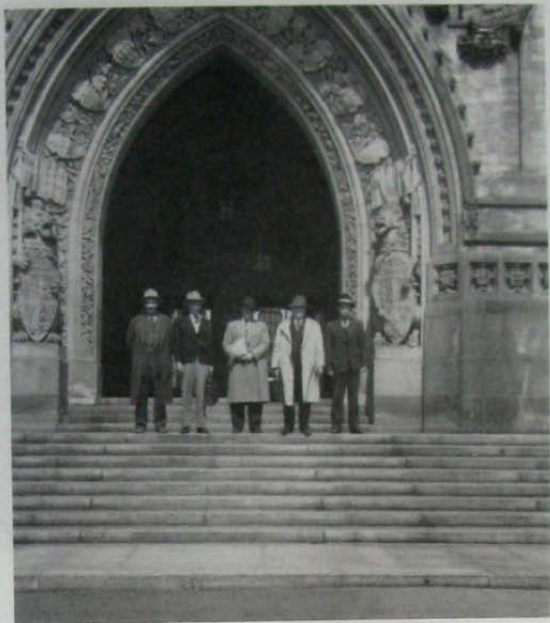


Plate 4: IAA representatives on the steps of Parliament in Ottawa in the late 1940s. Left to right: Mark Steinhauer, Ed Hunter, Albert Lightening, John Callihoo and Frank Cardinal. All were prominent in the early activities of the IAA.



Plate 5: A meeting tent used for part of the IAA annual general meeting in 1957. Meetings were held on Alberta reserves, sometimes outdoors.



Plate 6: Albert Lightening speaking at an IAA meeting. Lightening was president of the IAA in 1958. Coca-Cola was a favourite drink at IAA convention meetings.



Plate 7: John Laurie addresses a meeting at Saddle Lake in 1948. Meetings of the various subcommittees at IAA annual conventions were frequently held outside.



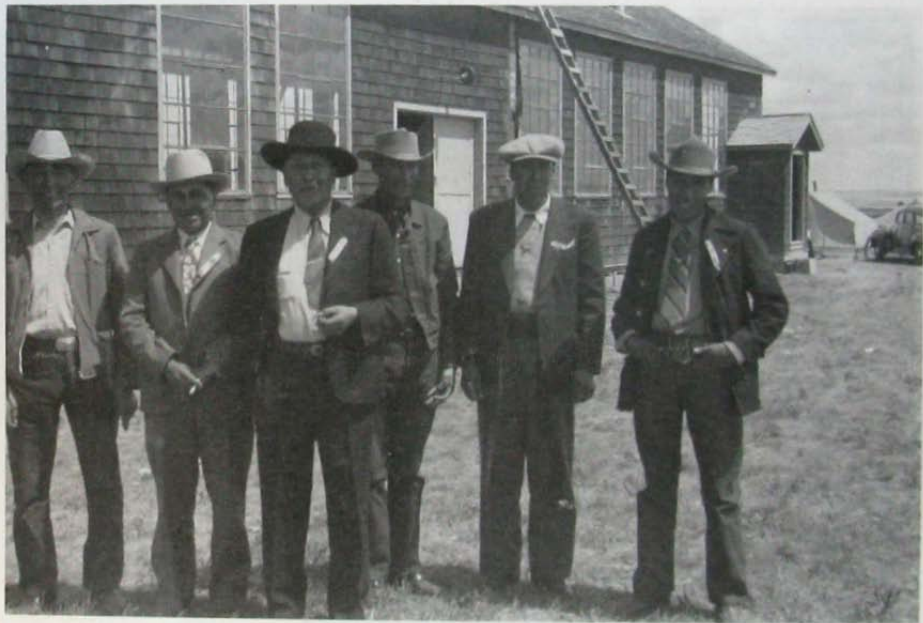


Plate 8: Four delegates (with ribbons) and two others attending an IAA meetings. Left to right: Chris Shade, Albert Manyfingers, Joe Bullshields, Dan Weaselfat, (unknown) and Ed Onespot.



Plate 9: IAA dinner at the Ermineskin Residential School, Hobbema. James Gladstone, president of the IAA in 1954, is fourth on the left. Peter Burnstick, another prominent founder of the IAA, is second on the left. Indian political groups often met at residential schools. Women of the reserve community hosting an IAA annual convention generally held a feast for delegates.



Plate 10: David Crowchild, who replaced Laurie as IAA secretary when Laurie fell ill in the late 1950s.



Plate 11: The Crowchild family at home on the Tsuu-Tina reserve, near Calgary. Crowchild and his wife were close to John Laurie and were very active in the IAA.



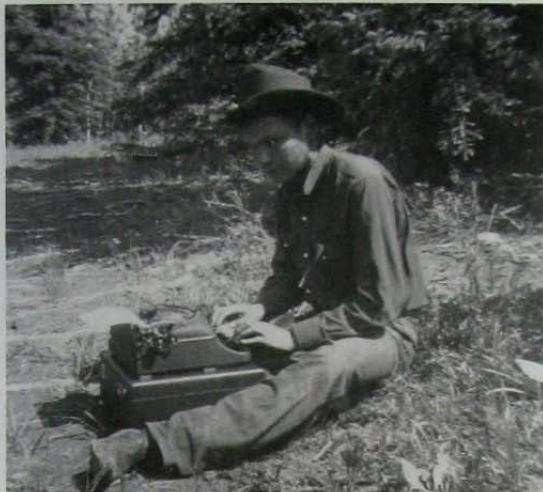


Plate 12: Ed Hunter at his typewriter. John Laurie was an adopted son of the Hunter family, with whom Ed Hunter stayed while attending high school in Calgary.



Plate 13: The new Stoney school opened in the 1950s. Improved education for Indian children was a primary concern for IAA members.



Plate 14: Stoney women and children gather at the opening of the new school on the Stoney reserve, west of Calgary.



Plate 15: Crowds gather at the opening of the new school on the Stoney reserve.





Plate 16: Stoney people carrying the centre pole for a Sundance lodge.



Plate 17: Bucking bronco event at the Banff Indian Days. IAA members often met at events such as this or the Calgary Stampede to discuss political issues with Indian people from around the province.



Plate 18: David Crowchild and family in front of the "bee" tipi at the Calgary Stampede.