

Aboriginal Leaders: A Photo Essay by Denis J. Okanee

Introduction by the Photographer

In 1969, when I was staying at a foster home in Vawn, Saskatchewan (where the creek meets the river), barking dogs drew me to a window where I saw a Native man going hunting. The man was riding a horse pulling a travois. It was as if the Native man appeared out of the mists of the past. This vision led me to develop an interest in traditional culture and art. This interest in the Cree heritage inspires all of my work.

I started to take a lot of pictures about three years ago. I started taking pictures and developing my photographic art because there were so few Native people who were photographers. The Native world, and particularly politics, is changing very quickly. The events that I have photographed will become important historically. The Aboriginal perspective of what has been happening is different from the non-Aboriginal perspective. It is important that today's events are documented through Native eyes just as it is important that Native people become writers. I want to encourage more Native people to do photography. We should create our own archives and galleries in our communities and in cities. We need these spaces which are our own. Photographs document the life and times we are having now. They will be there for the children.

I want to encourage more people to get to meetings and get involved. Now that my family and I do not live in Ottawa, it is harder for me to get to meetings. It costs a lot of money and we have children who still go to school. Sometimes, it is hard for me and I think about giving up. I know that I cannot do that. Since moving home to the Thunderchild Reserve in Saskatchewan in May 1994, I have started to take more pictures of powwows and fewer of political meetings. I have taken a lot of pictures of children, including my own children. I am a pretty quiet guy and sometimes it is easier to let the camera stand between me and the world. Photography is also good for me.

I feel very privileged to have been able to take pictures of the leaders of the last few years. Not everyone is allowed to do this. I have been allowed into meetings when the press has been excluded and this is a great honour for me. It is really important to make sure that you ask people for permission

before you take these pictures. This is not a legal obligation for me but it is an obligation that I feel as a Native person. I often talk to people for a long time before taking their pictures, especially the Elders. I try to walk in a way of respect and I believe that this is why some of the leaders have allowed me to so freely take their pictures.

Photography is the gift that I have to share with my people. I often just give my pictures away because I want to share and make people happy. Having my pictures in the *Native Studies Review* is exciting because they will be shared with many people.



Plate 1: Winston McLean presenting Treaty Land Entitlement seminar in Ottawa, Ontario, 1993. Left to right: Winston McLean, Director of the Treaty and Land Entitlement, FSIN; Rico Mirasty, currently Director of Self-Government Consultations, Meadow Lake Tribal Council; R. (Toby) Stewart, past Executive Director, Office of the Treaty Commissioner.



Plate 2: National Chief Ovide Mercredi after laying a wreath at the first Veteran's Day ceremonies that included Aboriginal people, Ottawa, 11 November 1993.



Plate 3: Elder Ernie Benedict, Mohawk Nation of Akwesasne, at the opening ceremonies for the Human Rights Memorial on Elgin Street in Ottawa, 1992.



Plate 4: Ron George (in front on left), President of the Native Council of Canada, attending the opening of the Human Rights Memorial, 1992 (companions unknown).



Plate 5: Bill Reid received the lifetime achievement award at the first Aboriginal Achievement Awards ceremonies in Ottawa at the National Arts Centre, 1994. He is photographed here with Prime Minister Jean Chretien and Native Council of Canada President, Ron George.



Plate 6: Ron George, President Native Council of Canada, speaking at the opening of the Native Justice Consulate, Museum of Civilization, Hull, Quebec, 1993.



Plate 7: At a conference in Saskatchewan, 1992: Ovide Mercredi, National Chief; Rigoberta Menchu (Guatemala), 1992 Nobel Prize winner; and Bernadine Walking Bear, Confederation of Tribal Nations.



Plate 8: Ovide Mercredi jokingly addressing the meeting of Chiefs in Fredericton, New Brunswick, 1991.



Plate 9: Ovide Mercredi with Elders and drummers after his naming ceremony in Fredericton, 1991.



Plate 10: Donna Phillips (seated) and Loretta Meade, Commissioners, First Nations Circle on the Constitution, women's meeting at the Native Canadian Centre in Toronto, 18 January 1992.