

The American Indian Press Association...a look back.

In the late 1960s I was editor of *Indian Times*, a small newspaper serving the urban Indian community in Denver. The *Indian Times* was published by the White Buffalo Council, our local urban Indian organization. In that position, I saw a problem in the lack of news about Indians in the mainstream press. The only time we would read anything about Indians was when there were demonstrations at local BIA offices, or when the fledgling American Indian Movement was in town.

In 1969, I secured a small grant to pull together a meeting of several editors of Indian newspapers to see what we could do about organizing for the purpose of improving our common lot. At that time, we guessed that there were some 125 Indian newspapers, ranging from one that published weekly to many single sheet mimeographs published monthly and even less frequently. Many of these papers would exchange complimentary subscriptions as a means of garnering news, ideas and graphics, so we had a pretty good idea of what our common problems were.

With the grant funds, I arranged a meeting in Spokane, Washington, bringing together editors I thought represented a good cross section of Indian country. These included Jim Jefferson of the *Southern Ute Drum*, Mary Baca of the *Jicarilla Chieftain*, Rupert Costo of the *Indian Historian* magazine and the *Wassaja* newspaper, Marie Potts of the *California Smoke Signals*, Frank LaPoint of the *Rosebud Herald*, Gwen Owle of the *Cherokee One Feather*, Carol Wright of the *Native Nevadan*, and Tom Connolly of the *Northwest Indian Times*, and myself. Although we all knew a little about each other, it was the first time any of us had ever met in person, but we got along famously from the start.

We later learned of Dick LaCourse, a young Yakama reporter who was working then for the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*. We were eager to get him involved since he was one of the only Indians we knew in the mainstream press. Dick would prove to be the real mover of the organization, and one of the most respected writers in Indian journalism.

We received another small grant in 1970 to hold three regional meetings in which we got input from Indian editors on their problems and their receptiveness to a national association. Those were revolutionary times, when a person could be accused of heresy to the Indian cause for whatever reason. And there were self-appointed guardians in most gatherings, ready to make charges of “Uncle Tomahawk” or “Apple”- epithets used to accuse someone of “selling out.” At one of our regional meetings, a young militant stood up in the audience and accused the Indian news media of forcing Indian people into assimilation no less despicable than the early missionaries. We were doing this, he said, by publishing only in the English language. Things were at a tense standstill while the panel of speakers tried to answer the accusation, until Harvey Wells, an AIM leader at the time, rose up large and broke the ice with a declaration, “English is the lingua franca of all intertribal affairs, now let’s get on with this program.”

We were all thankful for Harvey Wells' intervention, and all nodded in agreement although subsequently, I'm sure, we all had to look up the meaning of the term "lingua franca."

In 1971, we finally incorporated as an organization in Denver, with a threefold purpose: to provide a news service to our member newspapers; to help members improve the technical and editorial quality of their papers; and to provide a network for Indian journalists.

Strangely absent in our purposes was that of assuring protection of our collective First Amendment Rights. We knew we would be quick to take on the federal government or state government, but we didn't want to take on tribal governments at a time their existence was threatened by federal policy of "termination." There were plenty of enemies out there to fight in protecting our tribes and Indian rights, and that preoccupied our interests to where we didn't have to think much about our First Amendment rights under tribal governments - or so we thought.

Early on, however, we would find ourselves involved in an intra-tribal battle over termination. Although termination policy was on the wane in the late 1960s, the Colville tribe of Washington was in the death throes of being terminated. Hearing of our plans to form a press association, the great Colville leader, Lucy Covington, asked if we would help her put together a newspaper and other materials in a campaign to help defeat the forces of termination. What we didn't realize was that a tribal government had to agree to be terminated, and a willing partner in the process. Lucy and some of her young proteges were fighting to unseat the pro-termination tribal council members - "the Liquidators," as they preferred to be called. With a new council she could reverse the termination movement for the Colvilles.

I went up and helped her establish a paper called *Our Heritage*, along with an ad campaign. In a sometimes violent campaign, Lucy and her slate won the majority on the Council, and termination was stopped at Colville.

It is interesting how the Bureau of Indian Affairs viewed the AIPA in its formative days. During the unrest at Pine Ridge over the Yellow Thunder incident in 1970, AIPA was invited by the BIA to serve as a rumor-control function. Raymond Yellow Thunder, 51, was a Lakota man from Pine Ridge who was publicly humiliated then beaten to death by young white thugs in the nearby town of Gordon, Nebraska. The American Indian Movement came there to demonstrate against the racism that was rampant in those towns bordering the reservations; it was their first move from urban areas into a reservation, and it scared hell out of the BIA that AIM was now invading what the feds perceived as their colonial domain.

We had recently hired Dick LaCourse at the time, and we went to Pine Ridge to cover the unrest. Rejecting the BIA's request to serve as a rumor control center, we instead started the *Oglala Nation News*. As editor, Dick also resisted the efforts of either side in the

widening rift within the reservation to sway our reportage. We got the story out about what was really behind the unrest, that it was not just the murder of Mr Yellow Thunder, nor AIM's presence, but a growing number of grass roots people, who were fed up with being treated badly by whites, the feds, and some by their own tribal leaders.

Soon after we opened our Washington news bureau in 1971, we were invited to the office of the National Council on Indian Opportunity, located in the White House Complex. NCIO was chaired by Vice President Agnew, and was under the directorship of one Bob Robertson. There we were presented with several piles our news stories, all paper clipped where the NCIO critics and would-be censors were accusing us of inaccuracies, lies and distortions. Seated around the room were staff members to witness the ostensible grilling. At one point, the director told us that he knew someone on his staff was leaking information to us, and demanded that we point out the rascal. Dick and I looked at each other, incredulous, on the verge of laughter. It was true that we were getting leaked information from many government officials in DC, including NCIO, but we were not fools enough to release their names. But such was the state of affairs at the time.

We also wrestled with the concept of objectivity and truth, when those ideals might come in conflict with what may be seen as Indian interest or just cause. The issue came to a head during the AIM occupation of Wounded Knee in 1973 when some of the ideologically-motivated colleagues in AIPA were said to have abused AIPA press cards for other than reportorial purposes. AIPA was quick to issue a policy statement to its members. That document had the solid gold ring to it of Dick LaCourse's ethics and strong writing.

There was discussion early on of AIPA publishing a national Indian periodical in magazine or newspaper format. Yet another concept called for a national paper that could be readily regionalized to meet the needs on a tribal basis. But those ideas were rejected in favor of providing a news service to help improve the local Indian newspapers. Our concern was that a national paper would unfairly compete with and destroy the local papers.

Of course we are seeing now that such isn't necessarily the case. *Indian Country Today*, for example, with its national circulation, hasn't destroyed tribal papers, nor does it mean to. With significant growth in tribal financial resources, aided by computer technology, local and regional papers, which are vital to the social, cultural and political life of the tribes, are flourishing.

The American Indian Press Association closed its doors in 1975, it's demise attributed largely to its inability to raise funds. The foundations and church groups where Indian causes had gotten much of their support in the 1960s and 70s were not interested in our non-ideological goals. Those were heady times of revolution, and we were viewed by them as pretty "establishment." Another major problem was that the IRS determined AIPA to be a professional league or association, and declined our request for 501(c)(3) status. This made it nearly impossible for AIPA to secure foundation funds.

In *Indian Country Today*, and in the many other tribal publications, I can see how far the Indian press has come over the past thirty years. But in order to get a true measure of how far we've come, it's important to look back occasionally to what we've been through. I am proud to have played a small part in that progress, but the lion's share of credit must go to other journalists, especially Dick LaCourse, who passed away last year. Of him, Suzan Harjo wrote, "Dick was the gold standard of Indian journalism." That he was.

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