

Unsung Heroes: Uncle Louie and the Katzenjammer Kids...

Recently I received a book from the author with the grand title "Chief of the Chiefs." It's about Louie Bruce, who served as Commissioner of Indian Affairs from 1969 to 1973, in the administration of President Nixon.

Louis Rooks Bruce, Jr., was born in 1906 on the Onondaga Indian Reservation in upstate New York, and spent his youth on the St. Regis Mohawk Reservation. His father, Dr. Louis Rooks Bruce, a dentist, was Mohawk, and his mother, Anna, was Oglala Lakota. Louie was a farmer and dairyman, and a political leader of the dairymen's associations in his early years. He loved farming and the rural countryside, but civic leadership took hold and he was called upon to serve various causes, including Boy Scouts, public housing, and Indian affairs. A liberal Republican, he served in many appointed positions on the state level, and on many boards of directors, including the National Congress of American Indians in the organization's formative years.

The book, by Jane Richardson, is an enjoyable read, albeit a bit spotty, trying to cover so much territory of a great life. But it leaves fertile ground for some other author to write a sure-shot best seller -- a rollicking account of the administration of Louie Bruce and his "New Team," the Katzenjammer Kids, as they were known to the old line BIA bureaucrats they so irked.

It was an exciting era and the beginning-of-the-end of the BIA as colonial overseer of those it perceived as its Indians. President Nixon hand picked Bruce to be his Commissioner and personally instructed him to "Shake up that BIA, and shake it up good!" This was a strange command to a person of Louie Bruce's nature, for he was a gentle, unassuming person who soon became known as "Uncle Louie" throughout the BIA. But as it turned out, he could not have picked a better man for the challenge.

Indian journalist Richard LaCourse likened Louie Bruce to Pope John XXIII, who set a course for reform in the Catholic Church and opened the doors for progressives to bring about much-needed change. LaCourse's comparison was appropriate, for such was Bruce's style. From the outset, he laid out the goals he sought in his tenure: mainly of the Tribes controlling their own destiny, with resources to do it, and without fear of dreaded termination. Then in his own low-key way, he kept the way clear for his team to do its work.

Although the Commissioner preferred the name of New Team to describe his closest staff, they themselves took on the name used by their detractors. The Katzenjammer Kids, most of whom deserve their own "Unsung Heroes" praise, were an eclectic team of activists not well known in Indian Country. These included Ernie Steven, Oneida, as Director of Community Services; Alexander "Sandy" MacNabb, Micmac, as Director of Operating Services; and Leon Cook, Red Lake Chippewa, as Deputy Director for Economic Development. Also on the team were Tom Oxendine, Lumbee, a former Navy fighter pilot, and a square-shooting spokesman for the new team, and Robert Gajdys, whom they called their "hit man." Gajdys knew the system, and was creative in using it. In the civil service world where no person can be fired no matter how incompetent, Gajdys, it was said, could get the incompetent transferred to the farthest island on the Aleutian chain.

These men were brought aboard by the new Commissioner to carry out the President's directive, and his own reforms.

Bruce and his team worked under the firm conviction that the Tribes should have control of their own affairs, and that the BIA should provide the needed resources and funding for the tribes to exercise their sovereignty and rights to self-government. But they learned in short order that the Department of the Interior, under which the BIA was entrenched, tightly controlled all avenues of change, and through regulations, effectively resisted any reform. Add to this the recalcitrant bureaucracy in the BIA, and their mission was stymied. So they adopted a strategy of "don't ask, go ahead and do it." They proceeded with their mission, working directly with the tribes and circumventing the BIA Area Offices. Their attitude was that, by the time the slow-moving bureaucracy caught up with their new projects, their objective was fait accompli, or would result in too much of an uproar to stop or reverse. They ignored regulations and had fun doing it, both of which were antithesis to the bureaucracy.

According to Oxendine, their work began after four o'clock, when most Washington offices would start emptying of workers. They cultivated friends in the White House and Capitol Hill, and called on them in difficult situations. When one project was deemed by the Interior Department to be contrary to regulations or policy, and they learned that disciplinary action was in the works, they convinced a White House ally to send a letter from the President's office to the Secretary complementing the project and encouraging more like it.

This, of course, didn't set well with the colonialist "old liners" in the Bureau who saw their power and control slipping away. They set out on a campaign, criticizing the new policy, ridiculing the Commissioner, and working among tribal leaders in the field to rally opposition against him and his new team.

It was a time when a great schism was opening in the national Indian community. This grew around militancy in the urban Indian communities, and the widespread publicity the leaders of militant groups were getting in the media. They were seen by tribal leaders as usurpers who carried no credentials to speak for the tribes, yet they were being heard and taken seriously.

Because of its openness to ideas and speech, the National Congress of American Indians was targeted by new militant leaders, and the general assemblies of their conventions were sometimes taken over as forums for radical haranguing, much of it against NCAI itself and other "sell outs."

Seeing NCAI as tilting toward new activism, conservative tribal leaders established the National Tribal Chairmen's Association to speak for the tribes. The creation of the organization was sanctioned by Commissioner Bruce, and, as opposed to the NCAI, was funded completely by the federal government. Taken in by the National Council on Indian Opportunity, which was controlled by the very conservative, reactionary staff of Vice President Spiro Agnew, the NTCA severed relations with NCAI and other Indian organizations.

One of Commissioner Bruce's stated goals was for the Bureau to reach out to the urban Indian communities. These urban enclaves were largely the direct result of the BIA's relocation policy, and the Commissioner felt some continued responsibility for their welfare. When Indian

militancy rose up in the urban communities, Bruce was not afraid to talk with them about their concerns and their problems. This, of course, turned the more conservative tribal leaders against him. And around this issue a formidable alliance was formed with the BIA old liners, the NCIO, and the Tribal Chairmen's Association.

Their campaign against him was finally successful, brought about, ironically, by the AIM occupation and destruction of the BIA headquarters during the Trail of Broken Treaties. Soon after the TBT fiasco, Bruce was forced to resign, much of the pressure for which came from the NTCA-NCIO alliance.

By then, however, the momentum of change was unstoppable and irreversible. Nixon's famous Indian Message to Congress was issued, outlining the most prolific program for change in Indian Affairs since the Indian New Deal of the early 1930s. The centerpiece of this initiative was the Indian Self Determination Act, built on the prototype of the projects of Uncle Louie and the Katzenjammer Kids. In that sense, Bruce's term as Commissioner was successful, and along with John Collier himself, he will be remembered as perhaps the greatest leader of the BIA in that agency's history.

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