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## NORTH COUNTRY NOTEBOOK

by George Vukelich

"Many people think of the Indian as an ambitionless drunk. Others see him as Hollywood pictures him, a noble, painted, gaudily costumed savage. And a few white men think of Indians as the poor impoverished folks they send their old clothes to." So said Mrs. Nakonia (Niki) Barnett, a graduate student in journalism at the University of Wisconsin in a recent interview. Mrs. Barnett is herself of Indian extraction. Born in Kansas and reared in "deep east Texas," she recalls that she learned of Indian culture from her one-half Oto Sioux grandfather and in her "naive" days, believed that all were like him — full of initiative, progressive ideas, and yet retaining the "noble Indian" attitude. Now she believes that "whether Wisconsin people like to admit it or not, there is prejudice and discrimination toward Indians because there is a lack of information."

Mrs. Barnett's first experience with this "lack of information" came when she began to write her thesis about Wisconsin's Indians. "No clear view of the whole Indian situation was available," she says. "All kinds of agencies and groups and even private individuals seem to be doing things for the Indians, but nobody seemed to know or even care just what. There are over 14,000 Indians in Wisconsin and they had no place in state government to take their problems. There was no agency even collecting statistics or any sort of information on the Indian."

However, some of the information we do have is appalling. Indians have the shortest life span and the highest disease rate of any major ethnic group in this country. The average span for Indians is 43 years as opposed to 63 for the rest of the nation. Infant mortality is twice the national rate. Indians have four times as high a death rate from TB, three times from influenza and pneumonia.

And despite the fact that the U. S. Bureau of Indian Affairs spends \$50 million annually on the education of Indians — of whom there are still 325,000 on the nation's reservations — some 60% of Indian children still drop out of school after finishing the 8th grade. Why?

"I don't know," says Mrs. Barnett, "but that's the highest percentage of any ethnic group in the country. Hopefully, a state agency could gather the facts and disseminate them."

It is sad to realize how long the Indian has been without honor in his own land. They were treated shabbily, almost as children in the old treaty-making days.

Bishop Henry B. Whipple wrote back in the 1800's: "We treat as an independent nation, a people whom we will not permit to exercise one single element of that sovereign power which is necessary to a nation's existence. The treaty is cruelly conceived and executed in fraud. The ostensible parties to the treaty are the government of the United States and the Indians. The real parties are the Indian agents, traders and politicians."

Benjamin G. Armstrong, a part Indian himself, went further. He said flatly that the Indians had no idea of what they were signing away forever in the treaties. Armstrong quotes a U. S. Commissioner appealing to the Indians at the signing of a treaty in 1837: "The timber that you make but little use of is the pine that your great father wants to build many steamboats to bring your goods to you and take you to Washington

bye-and-bye to see your great father and meet him face to face. He does not want your land. It is too cold up here for farming."

"The Indians," says Mrs. Barnett, "have always accepted their treaties as an absolute truth, even today."

Yet, the white man has quite another point of view. At a recent public hearing in Menominee County, Roderrick Riley of the U. S. Bureau of Indian Affairs was quoted as saying: "Treaties are between sovereign na-



tions. None of the Indian tribes are sovereign. Today there is no legal means whereby the complaining party to a treaty instrument can go into a court of law in which it can be enforced. Indian treaties are not and probably were not sovereign treaties although they were negotiated and signed as such."

It seems to us at *Wisconsin Tales and Trails* that today the white man is doing almost as little for the Indian as the "treaty makers."

However, there are some hopeful signs in Wisconsin. Mrs. Barnett, for example, has recently been appointed to the Governor's Commission on Human Rights as Coordinator of Indian Activities. Although her job is in the budget only until next May, at least there is now someplace to go for information on Indian affairs.

And recently there has been a flurry of action by the state to aid the Menominee Indians who live in one of Wisconsin's most beautiful counties. The Menominees, also, live in what has been described as "Wisconsin's most severe poverty pocket." It is hoped that this recently instituted crash program will obtain for the Menominees the basic services most communities take for granted. For example, there is not a single doctor practicing medicine in Menominee County.

It is an irony that the very first Americans are going to be the last Americans to be admitted to full citizenship in their own country. We at *Wisconsin Tales and Trails* are ashamed of the past. But we hope to be proud of the future.