HIGHLIGHTS:

- William Joseph, aged 81, speaks at conference of elders on his attitudes to religion, alcohol, the treaties, the electoral system.

ELDERS' CONFERENCE

Elders' conference, with Mr. William Joseph of Whitefish Lake, Saskatchewan. Interviews by Mr. Richard Lightning, transcribed by Mr. Enoch Bird, both of the Indian Association of Alberta. Held at the Overlander Lodge, Hinton, Alberta, March 13/76. (Whitefish Lake Policies)


Richard: I'm going to ask one elder from Whitefish Lake, Saskatchewan, and he's William Joseph. Before we start talking Mr. Joseph I would like to ask you, how old you are and where you were born.

William: I'll be 81 year of age this summer and I was born at Sturgeon Lake, Saskatchewan.

Richard: Your parents, where were they born and where did they
William: Some place, but they passed on.

Richard: I'm going to ask you about the treaties, how the elders understand and how you've heard and the promises.

William: That's what our grandfathers told us not to grab anything that we don't understand. Just this elections we don't accept it we don't want to make a white man to be our chief because we got our own chief. And also we don't accept the provincial and federal elections, and we don't accept the liquor rights, nor we don't bring the liquor in the reserves. We try to make this a strong policy, so that we can hold our treaty rights, today some of the law and policies that applied to us we also don't accept it.

Elective System

Whitefish Lake and Big Rivers band in Saskatchewan don't accept the two year elective system but instead we take the four year system, and we really confuse the Indian Affairs because it's not in the Indian Act.

We didn't make that law and policy it's the white man that made it. We don't grab any kind of businesses especially the loans. We hate to mortgage our children, grandchildren's land; we would rather hang onto our land.

Whitefish Lake reserve members own whatever they have, they don't owe anybody anything. Sure they owe a little but not too much, just when they purchase a car, etc. and yet they don't mortgage anything they simply use their reputation. Sometimes we do help each other.

Religion

The only religion we take now is Indian religion, such as Sundances, etc. I am a Catholic and some are Protestants. We had fought amongst ourselves a lot, with our own relations such as brothers-in-law, sisters-in-law, brothers, sisters, etc. That's because of the white man's religion, the reason why we fight amongst each other is on account of the priest and the preachers. But today we stir that aside, I'm not saying we stir the priest and preacher away. We respect them and also our elder so right till now we've made good relationship amongst each other.

Treaties

As we believe in our treaties, they were explained by our forefathers and great-grandsons is what we are trying to hold today. Because you cannot rely on the white man. Is white on his face, but he's dark inside his face. Not like the Indian; he's dark on his face but he's white inside his face. That's what the elders used to tell us. That's the reason why I come here
to this elders conference, you have taught me a lot. Also learn a lot about the treaties.

The reason for the elders conference is to remind the people about our treaties and our Indian culture to the young boys and girls, so that they too can get some ideas from there.

We have some elders here at the age of 86 years. They too still holding on to their treaties and what was handed down to them in the way of the Indian culture, custom, from way back in the past. That's why I respect this kind of conference, it wakes you up.

First thing in the morning they get their peace pipe out and started to worship the Great Spirit. Each elder take turns worshiping to the Great Spirit. A lot of their words and wisdom reminds me of my grandfather and grandmother; what they used to tell me 60 years ago.

I have found these words and wisdom here in this conference which is held here along these mountains as I sat with my own native people. And I'm saying my friends to those who hear me - don't forget the elders - that is the only hold. If you try to swim across to a white man you're just going to suffer your children and grandchildren in the future.

Liquor

The other thing I'm going to talk about is liquor. It has killed us a lot. This is what the elders had told us in the past, the white man is going to give us a knife (sword), to wipe ourselves out. The liquor is the knife (sword). Today all we hear is this person is killed in the car accident, or shot himself and stabbings. We do everything to each other; this is what the elders meant in the past.

And so my friend it won't kill you if you leave your drinking alone, you'll be much healthier. I've seen some elders that don't drink reach the age 86 years, and yet they are active, good minded and healthy.

Nor he is not branded by the liquor and also he never brand his wife. He respects his wife, because he has promised God to have his wife as long as he lives. So for the past two weeks this is what the elders have been saying too.

And so my friends have mercy and faith upon me, if God willing some day in the future you will see me again to sit with you.

May God be with you, your pipe, pipestem, sweetgrass and your Indian culture. Always also I wish your children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren will all reach their old age.

Treaties (Richard Lightning)

The other thing I'm going to ask you, just the way you heard your leaders, forefathers tell about the signing treaties
(touching the end of the feather) a long time ago.

Did the elder or your forefathers make any mistake at that time, or were they made to misunderstand about the signing treaties? What was your understanding?

William: As far as I know the elders were right of what they said in the past, and also they were right when they said a white man will represent the Queen. But this is the way they have made the agreement when they sign the treaty, and that's what we're holding today.

Richard: Right now we are faced with hardships. Which way or, in what way can these problems be resolved? I would like your opinion on that.

William: There is a lot of ways of explaining it. A lot of people have taken on, that they didn't really understand, such as voting and liquor rights. Just for example this tobacco that we buy and smoke, taxed. We don't know that we're paying tax the white man made.

(End of Interview)