Alphonse Antoine, a former councillor on the Wikwemikong Reserve, has led an interesting and varied life. He fought in the Second World War and in Korea. He has worked in the U.S. and Canada at a number of different jobs: auto factory; railroads; lumber camps; river drives, etc.

HIGHLIGHTS:
- How Manitoulin Island was settled.
- Indian feelings about Canada and about Indian self-government.
- Changes in attitudes on the reserve. Failure to work together.
- Boat-building. Description of hand-made sail boats on Manitoulin Island.
- Natural resources on the Island.

Alphonse: I hear from the older people, from way back. And what little history I grabbed here and there, how they come to be. Even all these people, Indians as far down as Sarnia and all around the Manitoulin and north Georgian Bay. And you can tell by their language you know, that we speak the same language as them people in lower Michigan, we do. But, like I say, that time there was no actual boundaries as far as the
Indians were concerned. They didn't have boundaries, you know. And they took sides with the English. And the people that fought for the Americans, they started fighting these people here, that ran over here, 'cause they were helping the English. That's where the Indians come from here originally, from lower Michigan.

Christine: Is that where your family is, your parents' parents came from? Your grandparents?

Alphonse: Oh yes, yeah. Seems to me, from all I heard, there was never anybody here on Manitoulin. Like the Indians that originally around this area and this district lived all around the north shore. The only ones that settled here on the Manitoulin was the people that came from lower Michigan. They all talked the same language, you know, dialect. And we know they're from there. They got relatives down there too, you know, they left behind. The same name and that. And the reason they were taken into Canada and settled here, let them settle here, because they fought for the English. That's why. And then I guess they settled on Manitoulin. Well, they said, "We'll take the Manitoulin," and settled it. And they claimed it. They were the first ones to claim this island.

But after a while, you know, settlers wanted to come in and the government come and, a lot of stories about that. They didn't know anything, anyway. Somebody promised them something, "Well, I'll give you a little bit of this, a little bit of that," a few presents, you know. They didn't have no value on land or nothing like that. They took your word at face value right there, right there and then. But years ago, what I hear, the Indians, if they tell you they're going to do something, it was never written on paper or anywhere. That word was good enough and that's all. That was as good as any treaty proclamation or what have you. Their word, that's all you needed. Nobody ever backed off on their word and that's why they... it was good you know. They depended on, just on whatever promise they made, it was carried out. Nobody ever reneged on their promises. That's what the Indians were like years ago.

And the same here, I was talking to some guy up here the other day and there was a lot of sailboats; people used to have sailboats. They fished. The summertime they'd go and pick blueberries when there was no jobs. Feed themselves, you know. Welfare wasn't known in them days; no such thing as welfare. You took your family up along the rocks in the north shore here and go and pick blueberries, sell them. Gather up a little bit of money. Bring home some berries, put them away for the winter and this kind of thing. They were self-supporting. They didn't depend on the government, no welfare, no nothing.

And then, that time, them days, there was a lot of work. Manual work, like. Camps and lumber camps and saw mills and all that. With manual labor, you didn't have to have education. Today, today what the Indians are going to have to
depend on is education, that's what they got to fight with. Not with guns and bows and arrows. That's something of the past. Today you got to fight in the court for your rights. And the more education they got and if that's what they're going to have to use to win whatever they're fighting for, whatever their rights are, and that's it. And I don't think the government is providing too much money for Indian education like they promised. They promised that, too. "Oh, if you do good in the college, we'll pay all your way up right up to university. Whatever you want to do, whatever profession you choose. If you want to be a lawyer, if you want to be a doctor, whatever." But they're not doing it. Now, little by little they're cutting off - even the parents here now. There's parents here right on this reserve that's not making a hell of a lot of money - maybe school teachers and them kind of people - that are paying for their children's room and board.

Ernest: They're making, they are starting to make it tough.

Alphonse: Yeah.

Ernest: Because they see what happened when Indians were educated. You could see that at the table at the first minster's conference.

Alphonse: Yeah, talk back and he was using good, you know,...

Ernest: I was trying to illustrate, I wish I was in better command of English. I would try to explain at a meeting in Anderson Lake to the UCCM (United Chief and Council of Manitoulin). After World War I or II, after both wars, the Indian Department consisted of... they had to put these old officer class into something in the civil service. And pretty well the whole civil service was ex-majors, captains, colonels. They couldn't make it in the ordinary world, a lot of them. So that's what it was composed of. And when my brother and I went up for a meeting with Indian Affairs, that's the first thing we saw upstairs. 'Other Ranks' was the name of their washroom where the clerks went. They still had that class, officer class system.

Alphonse: Yeah.

Ernest: This was after the war.

Alphonse: Yeah.

Ernest: But as the Indians got educated and the battle got a little more sophisticated, these old majors and colonels couldn't cope with it. So the Indian department started bringing in more sophisticated people and the psychological warfare experts started coming into this organization. And just like the battle between baseball teams, if one team has a guy who is stronger, they put in stronger. But they always have the money to buy better players.
Tony: Yes.

Ernest: So that's the way the battle has gone. Now they can do it with withholding funds to weaken the other side. So you can see that coming.

Alphonse: Yeah. You know that time they had the big meeting? It was something like this self-government, this last one. The one before that, that big meeting they had?

Ernest: Yeah, yeah, the first.

Alphonse: I couldn't go. I had a sore back or something. So I went to Espanola. I wrote a letter here, wrote out a letter pretty fast and, you know, thinking about all of what they're doing down there. So I went to Espanola and I asked the station down there if I could broadcast my letter on the radio. So I give them, "Here, this is what I want to say," and I give him the letter. He read it. No, it was a girl first time. She went and brought it over to her boss and he read it and, "Yeah, put him on. Darn right, let him get on there."

So I talked from Espanola and explained what that trip was all about down in Ottawa. Then I talked about the 1812 war, you know. I said, "Where the hell would Canada be? There wouldn't be a Canada if it wasn't for Indians that helped the English that time when the States could have taken over this country. And what the hell do we get for it? We're not getting anything but a lot of dirt right now."

Tony: That's that little guy.

Ernest: That's that little guy.

Alphonse: I don't know.

Ernest: What's his name?

Tony: How did you, you know, when you talk about that, when you say that you broadcast that saying that there wouldn't be a Canada if it hadn't been for the Indians and yet you went off and fought in two wars for Canada.

Alphonse: Oh yes, after.

Tony: For Canada. How do you feel about that in view of the way in which, as an Indian person, that you are treated?

Alphonse: Well, times like that you can figure, you could be a lot worse off. You know, being under, say Hitler or Germany took over, all over. How would you feel, you know. In the case of the English, we had to take it. They had the army and everything. And bands here, all over North America, they was not united at that time. They just took them one by one and went right through.
Ernest: It was pretty well an individual decision, I think, you know. They just went. For the same reason I did, there was no work. Getting rations.

Alphonse: A lot of them didn't go over there because they were...

Tony: Patriotic.

Alphonse: Patriotic, yeah.

Ernest: Three square meals a day.

Alphonse: I bet you, if the truth was really spoken out, them soldiers themselves, the real truth come out, they didn't go there just because they were patriotic. Just on the spur of the moment, "Ah, I want to get in the army, want to show what the hell is going on." But they ask you that you know, "Why?" So you say the obvious thing, "For my country."

Ernest: We'd have a huge army in Canada if they took everybody that wanted to get in right now.

Alphonse: There is nothing you could do, you know, what the hell. Another thing, if all the Indians, not even one Indian went to the Second World War or the First World War, what kind of crap would they be shoving down our necks now? So we had to make little showing that we were still people of Canada and that we fought for Canada. And at least better than Germany taking over the country.

Ernest: Allan More (sp?) promised me some records, promised to give me some information about something he'd found about veterans from the first war and I was trying to get at this on the Toronto trip. He said Caughnawaga was the only nation or reserve to declare war on Germany officially, and somebody asked did they sign an armistice.

Alphonse: (chuckles)

Ernest: But they did declare war, yeah. But I think that's what a lot of the Indian nations should have done. You know, as a public relations thing. Since they were allies, like Sir William Johnson said, let's sign a separate, oh what do you call it, declare war for...

Tony: Oh, declaration of war.

Ernest: Right. I remember that piece of paper we signed when we joined the army. And there was no contract until the cessation of hostilities, that's what it says.

Christine: You know, you said earlier, Alphonse, that this reserve here, Wikki (Wikwemikong), because it's never been signed over by a treaty, it should really be considered another country. But you consider yourself to be a Canadian.
Alphonse: Yeah.

Tony: Don't you think that's a bit of a...

Christine: Is that a contradiction?

Alphonse: Well, you can't really say that you're another country, you know, just a figure of speech. Well how could we be another country? What resources do we have to carry on as another country? We don't have it. And furthermore, from quite a ways back now, look at all the things that the government's been doing for this reserve.

Putting the roads, housing, and all, lots of other things you know, that's going on. Some of it we have to pay, some of it is not being paid. Look at the housing especially.

Ernest: That's the danger of this word sovereignty. Sovereignty means absolute independence. And if they ever cut off that two billion something appropriation for Indian reserves, where would we be?

Alphonse: We wouldn't last two weeks here. I was telling the Indians over here. "Sure, we're unceded Indians, but how in the hell you going to carry on self-government? Because self-government means that you're going to have to be able to carry on medicare, welfare, what have you."

Ernest: You would have to tax your own people, no getting around it.

Alphonse: Yeah, and where the people is going to get the money to pay the tax? There is nothing here, no industry, no nothing at all. Actually, we've been living out, that's quite a while back, living out on handouts, we might as well say.

Ernest: It's like that play, it's the only thing we can do.

Alphonse: If they stop giving the grant, it would be almost a million a year on this reserve alone. Where the hell would we be? Just couldn't exist. No, you can't live the old way. You can't go back to the old ways now. You can't go and live on the shore in birch bark. Well what the hell, there is no more fish, no more deer, no nothing. How would you live? So, you got to realize that we got to depend on the government for livelihood. People lived off the land years ago, sure. Deer or fish or whatever, they didn't know what money was. Today, if you don't have money, where you gonna be? You're gonna starve to death. Get kicked around all over.

Look at the government right in Sudbury. They put out families in the park because they got kicked out of their homes. And the government backs up these people. The law backs up the owner of the house and if he doesn't pay, well, "Get out. I don't care where you go." The government doesn't care. The police will come there, "Here, you got to get out." They were
living in the park here just last summer, last spring. Living in the park. That's what I'm saying, if you don't got no means, no money, no nothing, how you gonna live? How you gonna do it?

Tony: Yeah.

Alphonse: Can't do it, that's all. Last two or three summers, there has been people here from Holland and Germany and other people trying to find out how the people are living and how the federal government is treating the Indian people. They don't even know. They think we get all kinds of money. The government is just handing us out millions and millions of dollars on account of the land they took over. That's what they think.

Tony: Well, it's not surprising that the Europeans come over here thinking that, when most Canadians think that. That's the view of most Canadians.

Ernest: We headed that and I told you we had a delegation from Mexico at our meeting in Toronto at the Assembly of First Nations. Did I tell you that?

Tony: Yeah.

Ernest: They sat in, but I'm sorry, we must have made a slip up. They should have had them, we had a banquet with speakers, we should have put them on, even if their trip turned late. They sat in on our meeting in Toronto. From Mexico and Bolivia, they come.

Alphonse: Oh yeah, education. That's the only hope.

Ernest: Yeah, that's what I say.

Alphonse: There's a lot of things that could be done here right now. Training, they're always talking about training the public, the younger generation for techniques and all this new stuff that's coming out. You don't see none of it on the reserves, eh. Not a damn thing. I think maybe some of these fellows would do good. Right here, what they have put on is here. Like we got carpenters, lots of carpenters. We got bricklayers and we got electricians, almost anything you want. They got it here on the reserve. And the women, homemakers, you know. At a big wedding, they'll show up with a goddamn big feast here in a hurry, that is just how good they are. Yeah, they cooperate. But now it's, I think it's getting a little backwards, we're sliding back all the time. Because on account of this idea, you know, this pay for everything. The thing that they had one time where they help each other. If that could be brought back in, the reserve would go just right ahead. But, you know, when you want to get along, or get somewhere, you got to have this unity. You got to help each other. You got to work together, but they don't. It's like me, one time I was up here going to Manitowaning. I got off
the road in a snow bank. I'm all alone and I'm digging out and finally pretty near get it back on the road. Oh geez, working my back off there and still I couldn't get it on the road. Pretty soon, big carload of young fellows, "Hey, Al, you having a hard time? Want to get your car on the road?" "Sure." "Okay, we'll put it on the road." Grabbed one end and put it three or four feet and run back to the back and put the other, you know. First thing they had it in the middle of the road. Well, there's an example there. I couldn't do it alone. I'm trying to work alone, get my car back. I couldn't do it. These fellows come along, my chums, eh. "Having a hard time Al? We'll get you on the road." Work together, there you are and away I go. There was only, very insignificant example but it's still an example of how unity works. And if those people had that over here again, like the old people the way they used to help each other. They made a boat; they used to make all kinds of sailboats. Christ, there would be about ten, fifteen guys there all helping out. Somebody go and get the timber in the bush for ribs and that, you know. And others would be making it. Helping out this one fellow. They are getting nothing out of it, just for nothing. Just so he'll have a boat.

Ernest: There used to be real good boats all over here, all handmade.

Alphonse: Yeah, all hand - they made their lumber handmade, no sawmill, no nothing.

Ernest: You'd see them going out all summer. Some coming in, going out blueberry picking. They were all made and they were great big boats, too.

Tony: They made them down in the bay here, did they?

Alphonse: Oh yeah, on the shore, South Bay. Should be a lot from South Bay.

Ernest: They didn't make them in the basement the way I heard some guys do.

Tony: To get them out.

Alphonse: And then they had to break the basement to get them out.

Ernest: That happened to Henry Ford, after he built his car, he had to tear a hole in the wall.

Tony: Tell me about that boat-building. Where did they make the sails, where did they get the sails from?

Alphonse: They sew it. But later on - I know my dad - there was a woman, a white woman named Pigeon had a sewing machine. They got her to sew the sail. Before that, they have to hand sew, sew it up by hand.
Tony: What did these boats look like?

Alphonse: They would be about twenty-four to about twenty-eight feet long. Usually, averaged around about twenty-six feet. Two sails, the higher the...

Tony: Two sails or two masts?

Alphonse: Two masts, they're like this. What the hell, this is not going to work.

Ernest: Bet you they have pictures of them in the newspaper.

Alphonse: Yeah. There's a higher mast and this one would be about that and they all used to have a jib. They'd have a, well, this is not too far back, on here. And then they'd put a jib in here you see.

Tony: The bowsprit.

Alphonse: Yeah, and see, it would be like this.

Tony: Oh yeah, yeah.

Alphonse: And they would have a kind of a bar here. When they were trolling, they didn't have to change and run around and look. They just let that, on the ring, eh, on the bar, slide it back and forth, that's all. The same with this one here. Like that.

Tony: Oh, yeah.

Alphonse: And they had the rudder here.

Tony: Where was the rudder? Behind the, and the rudder they'd steer from right at the stern here?

Alphonse: On the stern, yeah. And they'd just put a, you know, just a stick, eh. Right here, yeah.

Tony: And what was the beam, how wide were they?

Alphonse: Oh, they would be about, I'd say about eight, eight feet.

Tony: Oh, did you go fishing with them or...?

Alphonse: Yeah. Them days they used to catch three or four hundred pounds of fish just trolling, no net. Just trolling. They'd come in and they'd get about four cents a pound, three cents a pound. Them days, that was a hell of a lot of money, eh.

Tony: Sure.

Alphonse: That was good only for about June, July, and the
first part of August. After that, the fish wouldn't bite. But they made a nice pile of money, you know, for the winter. And they'd all go home. In the summertime, in July, they'd all go home, the whole works. About thirty sailboats, thirty-five sailboats. Just like a fleet going out. And July they'd go and they'd go and hay. Put away their hay, eh. Right after that, they'd work like hell, work all together. And they'd all come back again and fish till about the first part of August and then the fishing would die out. They wouldn't bite no more.

Tony: When was this? What period of time? What years were they doing this?

Alphonse: Oh, I'd say anywheres from 1920. The earliest is 1920 that I know of. They used to fish out of Duck Islands; it's down here. South of where Meldrum Bay is, it's on the north side and the south side. Then there's five islands out there; they call them the Duck Islands. Purvis used to have a big fishing station there, two big docks, twine sheds and two big tugs. They had pawn nets all over and they had gill nets all over.

Christine: Did your dad have a boat?

Alphonse: Oh, yeah.

Tony: He had one, too?

Alphonse: Yeah.

Christine: Did he make his boat?

Alphonse: No, he got somebody to make his boat and — all cedar, every inch of it. Handmade.

Tony: When did this die out? Making these boats, handmade boats?

Alphonse: Oh, I'd say around about, I was in school then, I guess.

Ernest: In the twenties, somewhere in there.

Alphonse: It might have been good up to the thirties. I went up there, after I got out of school. We tried that, me and my brother. But it was getting, starting to slack down quite a bit.

Tony: Fishing was getting poor already.

Alphonse: Yeah, trolling anyway. That's where they'd just troll. I used to rent a gas boat, myself. Troll with a gas boat.

Tony: What sort of fish were you catching, trolling?
Alphonse: Trout, all trout, yeah.

Tony: Lake trout.

Alphonse: Lake trout.

Tony: What caused the, why did this boat-building die out?

Alphonse: Well, I guess for one thing, I guess there wasn't that much fishing anymore. You know, like the South Bay people, they all used to come down there and troll. And they made good money, you know. Four cents a pound. A hundred pounds, four dollars. And they get four hundred pounds a day; that's sixteen. That was an awful pile of money in them days, you know.

Tony: Sure.

Alphonse: But it didn't last long. Still, they made a real good stake. Enough to put them through the winter and all that, eh.

Tony: And then they'd take them out and go berry picking, too?

Alphonse: Oh yeah. Some of these people here didn't go that way. They'd go picking berries all over.

Tony: Are there any of these old boats left around anywhere?

Alphonse: Gee, I don't know of any anymore. I don't know of any anymore.

Ernest: There used to be a hulk rotted away in the beach there and we'd play on it, you know, this big boat.

Alphonse: Yeah. I used to sail when I was only about eight years old. My dad used to sleep and have a rest in the afternoon and tell me to fish. I was a little wee fellow. Sail this big boat, twenty-eight footer all by myself. Pulling up fish every once in a while, you know. The first thing he'd do was look in the box and see how much fish I got. (chuckles)

Tony: Where did they learn to do this? Learn to make these? Where did these people learn to make these sailing boats because the Ojibway people didn't sail before did they?

Alphonse: No. There wasn't any, I guess, very much along the north shore, eh. They done it here, right here on the island.

Ernest: It could have been these brothers, they brought these missionaries. They taught trades, eh. They taught the stone-mason work and carpentry. And even right to a few years ago, there was a lot of stone masons here that learned from building the church.

Alphonse: They built all these churches.
Ernest: All that, take a run up there, this house. A big fence, stone fence, stones. He built that monument. You used to go in his house, he built his own furnace, fireplace. There was a lot of stonemasons then.

Alphonse: Yeah, all that's died out now. No more what you call stonemasons.

Ernest: The French priests or brothers probably taught them how to build boats.

Alphonse: Yeah, I think that's probably where that came from, yeah.

Tony: Sometime after the Second World War, after the First World War rather.

Alphonse: Yeah, even before that. Even before that.

Ernest: Maybe old Trudeau would be able to tell you this. He was in a lot of this.

Tony: He might know.

Alphonse: No, I don't see any quick, you know, development here going on. Actually there is very little resource here. They got, what is it, dolomite. Some of that. Well, there is dolomite all over this island. Everybody wants to sell dolomite, from here clean up to the west end of the island, because it's all the same kind of rock. It's about the only big thing they got here. We got a road made up to the south end of the island over here where we're going to start that. Somebody down that way heard about dolomite - that we're going to sell dolomite, Wikki's going to sell it. They got into it and right away they started.

Ernest: Then the city of Sarnia, they wanted to bring their garbage up here.

Alphonse: Oil, I don't think there is that much oil. There is some oil here. They claim, they figure they - like one geologist here, was around here for a while. He says the main part of it is up in the - say this is the American side and this is the Canadian side here. And here is Wikki over here, eh. We'll say this is Wikki, the south end. They say it's like that see.

Tony: Oh, yeah.

Alphonse: According to their geology, you know. They figure it, here's the big pot, right down here, right out in the lake here. And maybe some in lower Michigan, like Bay City, in around that area. We're about here someplace. No, actually I think it's this. But all in all, the biggest or the main source according to their geology, you know the formation of rock and that, all this, most of this oil would be right in this...
Tony: Right out in the lake.

Alphonse: Right out in the lake, yeah. Lake Huron. So we haven't got that much oil here. We say this is reserve here. We're way out, I come in too far here. It's only about, somewhere... we got some here, Wikki here. Cape Robert here.

We got some down in here, just about two miles from here. But we don't know how much, actually. I don't know, it might be just a pocket. Oil is coming out all the time. Been coming out of there for years. But...

Ernest: Natural gas, there...

Alphonse: Gas, there is lots of natural gas. All kinds of it. Anyplace they drill, try to drill for water, these farms out here, all they get is that old dirty coal oil and gas comes up when they drill down. So there might be a lot of that. A lot of that gas in here, natural gas. There's a lot of money in that.

Ernest: I remember our people asked for a geological study on our reserve. "Oh, there's nothing." But it's what they tell you. They won't tell you.

Tony: No.

Alphonse: Maybe they are not true.

Ernest: If they did find something, they would negotiate for lands, get you to sell your land. Then you'd suspect something.

(End of Side A)

(End of Interview)
FOOD
- gathering of
GOVERNMENT BY INDIANS
- concept of nationhood
GOVERNMENT BY INDIANS
- self-government
INDIAN AFFAIRS, DEPARTMENT OF
- self-government
INDIAN AFFAIRS, DEPARTMENT OF
- housing
MISSIONARIES
- influence of
RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT
- Indian participation in
TRANSPORTATION
- sailboat
VALUES
- loss of
WAR OF 1812
- aftermath of
WORK
- self-sufficiency
WORLD WAR II
- attitudes toward
WORLD WAR II
- enlistment