

one who immediately comes to mind. Of course, the Inuvialuit and the Gwich'in had always urged that that area be protected. In fact, we have the Inuvialuit and the Vuntut Gwich'in to thank for the constitutional entrenchment of the two wilderness parks in their land claims settlements.

3. So-called because there were designated under Section 1002 of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act.

Remembering *Nelna*–Bessie John

NORMAN ALEXANDER EASTON

The Northern Review #23 (Summer 2001): 205-211.

She was the finest woman I have had the privilege to come to know.

Nelna–Bessie John. Her spirit passed from her body on the 3rd of June 2000 in order to walk her own trail to heaven, where she has joined her ancestors and animal friends in their eternal vigil over the happenings of this world she has left. And might return to—*Nelna* was Upper Tanana, so reincarnation remains a possibility. I know that she will certainly be visiting many of us here, in our dreams or on the voice of a bird or the whisper of the wind, giving advice and comfort from her heaven as she did so often in her life here in our world.



There are many things of importance I could speak about *Nelna*–Bessie John. I was very fortunate to be one of the many that she took into her life to teach something of the *Dineh* way—the way of her Great People. The land onto which she was born and into which she was tied was the area that on our maps we might call the Yukon-Alaska borderlands. But it is not the *Dineh* way to make lines that divide people and Bessie never recognized the borders of maps or States. Over the past decade Bessie worked hard, at times despite great frustrations, to share with me the wisdom of her experience and deep thought.

So it is with great humility that I have prepared these words, brothers and sisters, to speak to you of one who became my Grandmother. And while

there is much to say, I have little time, and so will share with you only a little bit that I now know to be true because *Nelnah* showed me how it is so.

She led a remarkable life that witnessed enormous changes in the lands and lives of her people, the Upper Tanana *Dineh* of the Yukon-Alaska borderlands. Born in 1923, she was raised on her land, walking the trails between Coffee Creek on the Yukon River and Northway, Alaska, from the Chisana River to the Scottie Creek headwaters. Her family made their living hunting and trapping. In the summer, they were always on the move, from one established camp to another, following the hunting dreams of her father, *Klaa Dii Cheeg* (/his hand drops/ – White River Johnny), and uncles, *Seld' chuul* (Chief Johnson) and Titus John. Their dreams would tell them where to find the animals that desired to offer their bodies in exchange for the respect that was due them, and the women would follow behind, assisting in the processing and caching of meat, the transformation of their skins into clothing, and their bones into tools. Or they might stay at a fishing spot, netting whitefish, grayling, and pike, collecting berries and roots from around the village, always storing quantities away to meet their winter needs, and leaving something behind for *Taatsàan'* to express their thanks for the gifts of the land which Raven watched over.

When she was young, *Nelnah*, along with her cousin Mary Tyone, helped care for their aged grandmother, *Gaanh Daniht'ìg*, a woman who had a great influence on her grandchildren through her own teaching of the *Dineh* way—knowledge of plants, animals, geography, and history, how to cook and sew, and how to relate to the environment in a respectful and useful way. “I was born with my Great People,” she once told me. “I go to school [with them]. I didn’t know how to read, 1-2-3, A-B-C, but I go to proper school. Our Great People, they put me to school.” Through the day she observed the work of adults, and every night listened to their stories of history and the beginnings of their world. And she learned her lessons well, growing up into a highly skilled and knowledgeable woman, capable of living off the land, by herself if need be, and contributing to the needs of her family through hard work, prayer, and generous deeds.

Nelnah taught me that there are many trails in this world. Some of them we physically walked together when she was here; ancient trails across the landscape of the Scottie Creek valley that led from one camp to another, on to a village site, and, if we had continued, further across the mountains to Dawson people, and beyond that to the Mackenzie drainage.

She taught me that though we may know where a trail might lead us if we follow it, we cannot predict who or what we might meet along a trail we set out on, or how these encounters might change us—for good or ill—even whether we will continue along the trail set out upon, or turn off in ano-

ther direction. Everything depends on an awareness and interaction with whom we meet or what we witness along the trails we walk.

And above these earthly trails are other, more ephemeral ones, the trails of heaven, which are walked by our ancestors and the animal spirits. Sometimes the two kinds of trails intersect, a moment when the extraordinary might occur. You have to cultivate a keen physical awareness to follow a trail safely on earth, and a second, well developed, spiritual awareness to meet the trails from heaven.

"The world is like a spider's web," Bessie once explained to me. "Everything is connected. But you can't always see it. Sometimes you walk right into it without knowing, and you break things apart. You got to look ahead of you, look to see what's coming, and pick your trail to keep things together."

Nelmah looked ahead and behind continuously. She practiced a daily ritual of reflection—once in the evening, sitting on the side of her bed, she would consider all that she had seen and heard that day; in the morning, when she woke, she would sit again and reflect on the content and meaning of her dreams. She worked hard to integrate intellectually all the communications that were made to her, in this world and her dream world, in order to determine what her best course of behaviour should be. "Everything is speaking to you. Bird. Animal. You gotta listen to them, you gotta respect them. They try to help you. Tell you things. What they want. What they know. You gotta help them and they will help you."

Bessie never felt shame at her life and beliefs as an Indian person. She knew that it was a good life to live off the land and help care for it and the animals, plants, and soils, that shared life with her. She knew that they were sound beliefs she held that motivated her to be respectful of difference, careful in her actions, generous in her deeds.

Like many of her generation, Bessie went through a period during which she tried to fit herself into the emerging dominance of White culture. I did not know her then. But she told me she became very tired of it all, tired of trying to live in a world that did not seem to really value or want her. She laid down to die, as in the old way, locking herself in a cabin of a friend on the shore of Fox Lake. She could feel her spirit slipping away from her body, but she was blocked by the appearance of her older brother Joseph, who had passed on in 1927. "You cannot come here yet," he told her. "You have to go back. You have to do more work there." She awoke in tears of grief and regret, and set back out into the world to find the trail she knew she must walk before she was finished here.

It was about that time that she became interested in playing a greater role in the preservation of her culture, working with her daughter Lula, recording the old stories and history of her people. Shortly after, she began a program of study with John Ritter and the Yukon Native Language Centre

to gain the skills of a classroom Native language teacher. She taught Upper Tanana at the Beaver Creek school from 1989 to 1994, the year I began intensive work with her.

From the beginning of our relationship, she was a kind, generous, and patient teacher. Generosity was the highest human virtue for her, giving the greatest gift you could receive; for it was in the giving that one ensured gifts would flow back to you in the course of time.

One afternoon, I was helping her cut meat in her Beaver Creek smokehouse when a stranger to me passed by on the road. "Who's that?" I asked. Looking at him through the poplar branches she said, "I don't know; an Indian from somewhere, I guess. Gee, I feel sorry for him," and then called out "Hey, you! You want meat?" The man gratefully accepted the offer of several slices of dried moose meat. Her values compelled her to offer to share meat with him, even though he was a stranger; it was a necessary generosity required in order to ensure that animals would give themselves to her hunters in the future.

Another time a bunch of us was called out to help haul a moose out of the bush. Bessie walked out to the site and sat and watched as we came and went packing it out. As I returned for more I could hear her singing quietly through the bush. As I came into view, she was holding something in her hand and patting it into the moss with the rhythm of her song. When she saw me, she stopped her song and gave me a big delighted smile, and then told me which piece to take out next. Later, at the smokehouse while I helped her cut up meat, I asked her, "What was that song about? It was very pretty." "Yeah," she responded and continued to cut up the meat. After a few minutes she sliced a piece of fat with a little meat on it, about the size of her palm. "This is for Crow, like that. I leave her that there. That song I sing is for Crow, thank-you. He make me happy we get moose. Like that we give back to him there."

Her generosity even extended to the White people who had come to her land and the "government people" who were determined to take it away from her people, an act she saw as futile as long as she and other *Dineh* continued to hold the land through its occupation and careful use. "Indian and White," she once explained to me, holding her hands apart and then bringing them together to join as an intertwined clasping of her fingers, "both live here on this earth. We got to share with you this place here, for all people, Africans, Chinese, White and Indian. We all work together for a good life here. My grandchildren go to white school, learn to read, math, and I tell them my life and then together we gonna make this world a beautiful, beautiful place . . . Then I can go on my trail to heaven."

She resented deeply, however, the nation-state boundary between Canada and the United States that had been arbitrarily imposed upon the lands

of the Upper Tanana, separating her Great People from each other with different laws, education, and prohibitions on their activities. She worked hard to maintain her relationships across the border, travelling incessantly to Northway, Tanacross, Mentasta, Chitna, and other places where her relatives lived, bringing gifts and receiving them in the way she was taught. "My people help each other," she told a group of us gathered to discuss cross-border issues. "Someone there [in Alaska] wants to bring me fur coat, shirt, that what I like. Rabbit skin, martin, potlatch food. They [customs] want tax. It hurts my heart . . . Where do government people think I came from? A hole in the ground? . . . Who is that Queen Elizabeth anyway? Who made her? We are Queen here, we are all Queens, Native people.

"We free first time. They take moose meat, fish, big cook, hundred people each share. Don't make law for Indian people, I tell them. We don't grow dope. I want no law, I say that, say no law for us, free, boundary line. That's for all our people to share. From Alaska we can go potlatch. We go down there, two, three months, don't check us. No law for us, because we born here. Don't let government step on you guys. No!"

Sharing, or the lack of it, by White people, was also a frequent theme in her public political statements. Following a visit by the territorial conservation officer to check on a report that a moose had been killed by an American Native visiting Beaver Creek, she told a meeting that "Government should not tell Indian people how to eat, how to live. My people share all this land with them, give them everything to use. They should share too. If I was Queen Elizabeth that's what I would do. Tell the government to share. If I want I could ask my people from Arizona to come here, live here, have garden. They got no water there. We could bring all the Indian people here [laughing at the thought]—all Yukon one big garden."

She did not like the Yukon Land Claim Final Agreement. To begin with, she could not believe that the land could be alienated from her people by a distant edict by a government that did not live on the land. Neither did she approve of the carving up of the landscape into separate First Nation administrations.

Addressing a meeting in Burwash, she said "We are one nation to this country where we was born! That's what they should tell the government, I say. Where is our mother? There was one that came from the ground to this earth here. And government people think they're our bosses. We should be boss of our country. One trail from all the way to Alaska. All the way down from Alaska to that river there. I talk about that river, that Yukon River, belong to Indian for Earth. God, who made that river for Indian food. That's our food, that river. No one made for us, only Earth and God can make for us our food. Government should know that.

“They want their settlement, settlement. I can’t speak no more for that. How can government tell us, ‘Give me your land, I give you one dollar’? I don’t need, we don’t need one dollar. Our Great People, where we come from? Earth. God made us. *T’òdòdìht’ây*, in our language, that’s God. He make us. Animal, our food. Fish. Us. Every kind of animal, she made. We belong to our food, we, us here, us old Indian. We get our food, we don’t need money. We don’t need fifty cents, one dollar for our land.

“Now, I don’t know, it’s like I go in that trap. How am I going to crawl out? They got *big* trap, Indian people they’re in big trap, that’s what they do to us. Every one of us. ‘Get your land! Get your land!’ It’s a big trap they spring for us. ‘Get out. You guys got no money. Get out Indian!’ that’s what they’re gonna tell us. Me, I know.

“Every day I stay home I was thinking. We should share the land with each other. We are one First Nation. We are Indian on our land. We should share our land now, together.”

She believed deeply in the necessity of maintaining a single *Dineh* identity. She recognized that certain families or clans had specific claims to certain areas of the landscape, that language and traditions varied across space. But she also lived with her knowledge of the cross-cutting nature of *Dineh* kinship and history. Reflected in the existence of the travelled trails between momentarily separated relatives, kinship demonstrated a greater principle—that all Native people were one intricate family of relations, and they held an obligation to share with each other as each needed and as each could provide.

Bessie loved music. She liked Country and Western, as many rural folk do, because it speaks to the concerns of daily life. She enjoyed Elvis Presley, when he sang his blue songs about affairs of the heart, because that was a supremely important topic for human thought. A Cape Breton fiddle tune would get her toes tapping and once, travelling in my truck, she opined that the sound of Billy Bragg emitting from my tape deck was “pretty nice.”

But it was the music of her Great people that was always present in her daily life.

Whether it was a hum over the fire in the smokehouse while she brewed tea.

A soft recital of thanks to *Taatsàan’* – Raven, at the site of a gift of moose in the bush.

A laugh-filled round of happy songs with her grandchildren in the classroom.

Or a sad lament for lost love while sewing birchbark.

I heard her rich and powerful voice in all these contexts and more.

But she sang best at potlatch, when she could join in with her Great People, raising their voices together as a community—defining their unity, cele-

brating their history, confirming their continued existence as *Dineh*, despite the pressures of western society to erase them from memory.

The power of such moments, when a community joins in song, should never be underestimated or taken for granted. It is a responsibility we carry to our past, a gift to ourselves in the present, and a joyous prediction of the potential of our futures.

This is why, at the deepest moment of grief, when one who is loved leaves us for heaven, *Dineh* join together to dance and sing.

We stand in a circle, our hands cupped in front of us to catch our tears even as we sing, and the voices of the living around us hold us here and tell us that this world still holds much love for us.

Bessie told me we should not cry for the departed—why be sad for one who walks the trails of heaven?

We should sing together and make everyone happy; and as we give each other this gift of song, say *Tsinni*, thank you, and let it make you happy and help you make this world a beautiful, beautiful place.

Nelnah's connection to the land, the land of her Great People, as she called her ancestors, was deep. Together with her brother Joseph (Tommy) Johnny, she worked hard to pass on her knowledge of the place-names and history of the land, the land onto which she was literally born and into which her body would one day pass.

“My mother, she scream for me when I born. How many inch of our blood here? I don't born on white sheet, no way,” she told us, referring to how she was birthed onto the ground, the blood that she shared with her mother during her pregnancy soaking into the earth. “Our blood is still on where I come from, dirt . . . I don't fall onto white sheet. Our blood is part of the Earth, here.” *Nelnah* was indeed, as Catherine McLellan has said of the *Dineh*, “part of the land, part of the water.”

The time that I was able to share with Bessie John was always full, due to her expensive knowledge of her land, her Great People's history, the *Dineh* way, and her untiring commitment to see that this knowledge remains in the world through sharing it with others. She taught many much, and much that we perhaps do not yet understand or appreciate, but may one day.

As for me, *Nagli* that I am, I believe that she recognized me not for what I was but for what I was capable of becoming, if I cultivated the ears to hear, the eyes to see, the head to think, and the heart to understand—

“Listen. Every land has got a story, Norman. You gotta listen.”

About the Author

Norman Easton is Instructor in Anthropology and Northern Studies at Yukon College. He is currently completing a manuscript on the social history and cultural geography

The Insolence of Office and Australia's Indigenous Northlands

PETER JULL

In 2001 and 2002 the Australian northern territories and indigenous peoples have gone all but unheard amid wider political debates impacting on them. In one happy event, however, the anti-Aboriginal government of the Northern Territory (NT) lost office at the August 18, 2001, election after 27 years of unbroken rule since the NT won self-government. Labor with a pragmatic moderate face, and an able new leader, former broadcaster Ms Clare Martin, defeated the tired, fumbling, and arrogant CLP (Country Liberal Party), placing a prominent Aboriginal leader, John Ah Kit, in cabinet. There is no question that the CLP's flirtation with Pauline Hanson's One Nation party of xenophobes and Right radicals in the final days of the campaign helped Labor over the line. At last the CLP's habitual election strategy of racial scare-mongering had failed. (For NT background, see Jull in *The Northern Review* No. 21 and earlier issues.)

The biggest moment in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs—other than re-election of the Howard federal government in November 2001, see below—came in mid-June 2001. *The Age*, Melbourne's world-respected broadsheet newspaper, published allegations by four unconnected women of rape 20 years ago involving the elected Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) chair, Geoff Clark. (A year later—28-6-2002—the press reported that police investigations would not result in charges being laid unless further information came to light.)

Clark has stayed in office through all this despite some calls for his resignation, and although badly damaged in the view of many whites and blacks. This is a Catch-22 situation: Clark is articulate, politically savvy, an effective operator in public and private, and particularly able on the big subjects of the Aboriginal political portfolio (e.g., international, treaty, constitutional, and rights demands), if politically maimed, but his deputy, Ray Robinson, also a survivor of unproven rape charges, is widely seen as so politically compromised by his Outback Tammany style as to be unsuitable as a replacement. At the time of writing in July 2002 both men are re-contesting their ATSIC Commission seats and national leadership, so interesting times may lie ahead.