

Nelson Wallulatum celebrates 20th year

Wasco chief keeps an eye on two worlds

by Cynthia Stowell

Tribal chiefs are not what they used to be. There was a time when being a chief meant staying home and interpreting customs or arbitrating family disputes. Now a chief like Nelson Wallulatum of the Wasco tribe is more apt to be found in a Washington, D.C. office drumming up support for the latest Congressional lobbying effort.

As Chief Wallulatum passes the twenty-year mark of his tribal leadership he looks back not only on his own changed style but also on a century of evolution in the meaning and function of a chief. And yet, in the spirit of continuity, which Wallulatum says is one reason for the chieftain institution, some things don't change. Many of a chief's concerns are the same, notes Wallulatum. It is just the methods that evolve.

Chief's role not simple

At a time when tribal boundaries are less clearly defined and decision-making responsibilities are more obviously exercised by management and council, chiefs might appear to be obsolete. But Wallulatum has not worn himself out during the last twenty years being a figurehead. If anything, his duties have expanded.

When he's on the reservation he's a traditional leader and a tribal councilman. When he's off the reservation he's a delegate, politician, P.R. person, and interpreter of treaty rights. And wherever he goes, the chief is a reminder that tribes are governments unto themselves. "We stand as a symbol of tribal sovereign governments under the treaty," said Wallulatum of the three chiefs.

Wallulatum was a young man of 33 when he was elected chief of the Wasco tribe on May 23, 1959. Not so young when you consider that a century ago chiefs were dying younger than that, noted Wallulatum. His was a family of leadership. His uncle Joe McCorkle was Wasco chief until his death in 1958. His brother was a councilman and his mother Ida Mae Palmer was a self-styled "politician" in her district. Chiefs sprinkled his family tree.

"The greatest thing in my life was when the opportunity arose for me to dedicate myself to the people," said Wallulatum. "That dedication was to the welfare and



NELSON WALLULATUM

Traditional braids and a Day-timer in his shirt pocket mark Wasco Chief Nelson Wallulatum as a modern-day chieftain. Splyay Tymoo Photo by Stowell

advancement of my people to something beyond what we experienced." That dedication was also a lifelong commitment, a term that usually ends only with death.

"After twenty years a person becomes tired," admitted Wallulatum. "Everyday you try to initiate some way to progress, establish programs to better your people." But the chief plans to stick with it. Besides, "my people won't let me retire," he smiled.

Carrying on the Wasco tradition

His people are the Wascos, descendants of the Chinookan linguistic family that inhabited the southern side of the Columbia River, before the 1855 treaty. Wallulatum's ancestors were a powerful economic force in pre-treaty days, exercising control over the salmon resource and trading their goods for slaves.

Wasco dominance can still be seen today on the reservation, observes the chief. "You can see it in every

department," he said. "They are a more advanced, leadership-oriented people." Treaty-signer Billy Chinook was the first to be educated off the reservation and a hundred years later a Wasco was the first college graduate, noted Wallulatum.

Their willingness to adopt new ways resulted in the Wasco traditions becoming less visible, said the chief. Wallulatum himself cannot speak Wasco fluently although it was his first language. While he claims not to worry too much about the preservation of tradition ("it's natural"), the chief has brought some songs and dances out of obscurity in recent years, using them "not for exhibition but to teach Indian tradition."

Part of his mandate as chief, Wallulatum believes, is to interpret and be a spokesman for Wasco customs and tradition. As the tribe's representative, he recognizes that there are "strict rules to follow," including discipline, respect for elders, and the

preservation of resources. Wallulatum also considers it his duty to settle disputes when they arise—to be "the final rule".

A life term on Council

The Wasco chief's other responsibilities derive from the tribal constitution adopted under the 1934 Indian Reorganization Act. The constitution recognizes three chiefs for the three districts, which roughly correspond to membership in the Warm Springs, Wasco and Paiute tribes. Also recognized is the tribal custom for selecting successors for the chiefs, which today is done through a majority vote of the district.

It is in the constitution that chiefs are granted life terms on the Tribal Council, the single most demanding responsibility of their chieftainships. As the lifelong "leader of a political body" Wallulatum feels naturally in tune with his constituency. "The Wascos put their full confidence in me to operate in their interest. I don't need to go back and meet with them regularly. I live with my people."

Wallulatum is probably most visible in his capacity as councilman. Council duties include at least two days of meetings each week, occasional general council and district meetings, and committee meetings. Chiefs along with other council members, spend a great deal of time on the road, traveling to conferences, meeting with legislators, negotiating with federal and state agencies, and promoting good public relations.

It is the amount of off-reservation activity that makes the chieftainship a very different function than it was when Wallulatum first assumed responsibility. The issues and concerns—treaty rights, sovereignty and the people's welfare—are the same, assures the chief, but the method of achieving those ends has evolved.

Instead of working only at the reservation level, leaders like Wallulatum have begun to cooperate with the private and public sectors off the reservation. And rather than simply reacting to policy and legislation, they are anticipating events and providing input in the planning stages.

"I've been criticized by members of other tribes as being a "white man thinker," commented Wallulatum with a shrug. But he feels his own people understand.

Not 'White Man' concerns

Wallulatum's concerns are certainly not typical 'white man' concerns. And they go beyond his allegiance to the Wasco people. The chief is known for his bold assertions of tribal sovereignty and treaty rights. "Being a descendant of those who signed the treaty, you have to follow along and understand what is in it," he remarked. "Our sovereign powers are derived from the treaty—the constitution only strengthens them."

In fighting for the preservation of treaty fishing rights, Wallulatum has considered not only the legal importance of the treaty's credibility, but also the cultural and economic role of the salmon in tribal survival. As chief, he has seen treaty fishing rights tested and upheld in federal courts and the tribes granted a greater role in fishery planning.

Wisdom, experience, and worldliness

While he works to preserve the tribal sovereignty, without which chiefs would certainly be obsolete, Wallulatum is concerned about the future of his own Wasco tribe. He has no offspring, having never married, and has not been able to pinpoint a suitable successor.

As always, it takes wisdom and experience to be a good chief, says Wallulatum. But these days it also takes a measure of worldliness and perhaps some formal education, although Wallulatum has managed with just six years of schooling.

Perhaps more than anything, it takes sacrifice. Chiefs must be satisfied with a humble standard of living—they receive no salary beyond their Tribal Council compensation. Wallulatum supplements his tribal income with a tree-thinning business, being a self-confessed failure at commercial fishing, and weary of construction.

Public appearances as well as ceremonial and council obligations make privacy impossible, gobbling up available hours. But somehow Wallulatum finds time for the personal study that keeps him abreast of the contemporary legal and political climate.

For, if Nelson Wallulatum's twenty-year career is any indication, the modern-day Indian chief cannot be content with tending to tradition. The whole world demands his attention.

Tenth Annual Pi-Ume-Sha Powwow Contest Results

- Queen - Kimiko Danzuka**
- 1st princess - Annette Jim**
- 2nd princess - Jana Henry**
- 3rd princess - Mariam Tias**
- 4th princess - Ruth Anderson**
- Girls 6-under Round Dance**
- 1st Irene Onepennie**
- 2nd Shirley Allen**
- 3rd Masami Danzuka**
- 4th Angela Polk**
- Boys 6-under War Dance**
- 1st Merle Eaglespeaker**
- 2nd Joseph Boise**
- 3rd Jose Calica**
- 4th Brian Lincoln**
- Girls 7-11 Round Dance**
- 1st Julia Onepennie**
- 2nd Sara Scott**
- 3rd Lavina Colwash**
- 4th Rosella Anderson**

- Boys 7-11 War Dance**
- 1st Michael Allen**
- 2nd Curt Jim**
- 3rd Aaron Smith**
- 4th Danny Hobbs**
- Girls 12-16 Round Dance**
- 1st Melissa Johnson**
- 2nd Sandra Shike**
- 3rd Becky Rhoan**
- 4th Angie George**
- Boys 12-16 War Dance**
- 1st Frederick Johnson**
- 2nd Todd George**
- 3rd Ted Umtuch**
- 4th Steven George**
- Girls 16-under Graceful Dance**
- 1st Masami Danzuka**
- 2nd Brenda Honena**
- 3rd Julie Seelatsee**
- 4th Alice Sam**
- 5th Shari Sampson**

- Boys 16-under Straight Dance**
- 1st Jordan Whiteye**
- 2nd Steven Whiteye**
- 3rd Pierce Harrison**
- 4th Darryl Growingthunder**
- 5th Jason Allen**
- Women's Buckskin Dance**
- 1st Theresa Willis**
- 2nd Joyce Azure**
- 3rd Liz George**
- 4th Vivian Peters**
- 5th Sally Rhoan**
- Men's Traditional Dance**
- 1st Leander George**
- 2nd Robert Allen**
- 3rd George Meninick**
- 4th Galen Yallup**
- 5th Arnie Patrick**
- Women's Team Round Dance**
- 1st Esther Telakish, Cindy Yallup, Charlotte Herkshan**

- 2nd Shirley Patrick, Mavis Spencer, Jeannette George**
- 3rd Vivian Peters, Theresa Willis, Titto Moses**
- 4th Marlene George, Josephine George, Janice Jack**
- Men's Fancy Team Dance**
- 1st Johnson Meninick, Reggie Walsey, Leon Thompson**
- 2nd Merlin Bullchild, Lake Whiteman, Verlin Whiteman**
- 3rd Mike Thompson, Wilson Totus, Frank Totus**
- 4th Raymond Meanus, Gene Harvey, Bryce Neaman**
- Men's Individual Fancy**
- 1st Norman Johnson**
- 2nd Leon Thompson**
- 3rd Rainbow Azure**
- 4th Mike Thompson**

- 5th Johnson Meninick**
- Judges**
- Bernard Whitehat**
- Arlita Rhoan**
- Paul Smith**
- Thomas Bigspring**
- Hattie Johnson**
- Mary Thomas**
- Drummers**
- Walking Eagle, Treaty of 1855, Four Sacred Mountains, Bear Paw, Amikay, Snake River, Umatilla, Percy Bullchild, White Horse, All Chiefs, and Heart Butte.**
- Stick Game Winners**
- Johnny DeSoto, Nixon, Nevada and Schurz, Nevada**