

Indian Icon, AIM Member Bob Robideau Visits Tribe

ROBIDEAU continued from front page

time when the federal government was seeking control of such minerals as uranium and gold known to be under Indian land in the area.

With federal money, the Tribal government under the leadership of Dickie Wilson formed and armed a group of enforcers called Guardians of the Oglala Nation, not ironically shortened to GOONS. They are thought to be responsible for as many as 60 Indian deaths in a three-year period — 1972-75 — on the reservation. These deaths surpassed by some ten times the per capita number of deaths in the city of Detroit at that time, then considered the murder capital of America.

In our continuing effort to keep Indian history alive, and to look at it from the different perspectives that still are available to us, Smoke Signals has embarked on a series of stories about this time period, this watershed incident in the on-going Indian wars. This profile and update of Bob Robideau is our latest installment.

AIM began "at a time when there was great unrest in America," said Robideau during his recent visit to Grand Ronde in November. "It was not just about Native people... It was the time of the Civil Rights Movement. It was the time of Vietnam."

"We, too, thought it was time to stand up and lend a voice to the oppression we were feeling," he said of the Indian movement that he joined.

The period brought new meaning to Robideau's life. It started here in the Northwest where he traveled early among youth reformatories and then to adult penitentiaries — an experience he said in an interview at his sister's house in Portland, that was "common amongst poverty people."

"I became very interested in why this experience was so common for people like myself."

The collection of AIM chapters grew rapidly in the years running up to the 1973 Indian takeover of Wounded Knee and the Oglala fire at Pine Ridge in 1975.

"I became active in Northwest AIM because of family and friends," Robideau wrote in an email. "If you care to look at the other AIM groups, you will discover that these same family ties held them together and still do today... Short of family squabbling and periodic in-fighting due to disagreements, we remain unified in our priorities and course of struggle today."

By sending out patrols to protect urban Indians — the first action was to set up patrols in Minneapolis against police who were abusing Native alcoholics — AIM went "from an urban struggle to a national struggle," he said, citing the 1970 protests at Plymouth Rock, the 1972 cross-country Trail of Broken Treaties and the 1973 takeover at Wounded Knee. Robideau joined AIM in September, 1973.

"I hadn't been a member two months when there was a call for all members to go to Pine Ridge because the BIA police had just killed Pedro Bissonette.

He had been President of the Oglala Lakota Civil Rights group that was trying to oust Dickie Wilson.

"We got our group and our guns together, a caravan of 6-7 cars," said Robideau. "We were very excited but angry. Leonard (Peltier) and Steve (Robideau) knew Pedro. Russ Redner fought beside Pedro at Wounded Knee. There was lots of anger."

Following Bissonette's funeral,

also come in for criticism from Robideau.

With Leonard Peltier, now nearly 30 years in jail, still seeking release, Robideau has stood by him — his first cousin — and worked in many ways for his release, not all of them well-regarded by others in the movement.

The last time he visited Peltier, however, was in 1992, though he continues to communicate through Peltier's

facilities like those at Grand Ronde on any of the other reservations he's been to. "Most of the reservations I've been to look like dumps," he said.

"You have a lot to be grateful for."

Regarding Indian history, he said, "You'll not find any of this in your television sets. You'll not find any of this in your computer games but you will find it in some of these educational facilities here. You will find it as you develop your own educational orientation."

In 500 years, he said in response to a question, "the federal government has done exactly that: killed all of our teachers, and indoctrinated us into accepting their teachers."

As the movement has fractured and those involved gone their own ways, participants continue to see what it has become and what might have been.

AIM is still based in Minneapolis and continues to evolve, and many, like Robideau, hold on to enduring values that remain and fight injustices, old though many are, that continue to insult the memory of the movement's greatest efforts.

"Leonard Peltier is a good example of how people have been inspired," he said. "His name is mentioned in every struggle. It inspires people to put their bodies on the line."

But after all these years, said Robideau, "the appeals process is pretty well exhausted. They continue to search documents through the Freedom of Information Act seeking new evidence for new appeals," and the defense team is looking toward Peltier's first scheduled parole hearing in 2008. "Realistically," he said, "Leonard will probably spend the rest of his life in prison."

Robideau has lived in Barcelona, Spain since 1996 with his wife, Pilar, a doctor, where he continues to speak out for Native Rights, continues as International Spokesman for the Leonard Peltier Defense Committee, and continues to work at the daunting task of finding closure for AIM's heyday.

From his home in Barcelona, Robideau also is working on a book that will detail his family history back to the 1600s. During World War II, Robideau's parents lived for a time in Portland's Vanport, where they worked in the war effort. His grandmother, he said, was a welder there. The family included 12 brothers and sisters who "picked apples and fruits to survive."

Initially, AIM's struggle was "financing and building an infrastructure that would promote awareness," said Robideau. The most important change has been the group's ability to communicate the message widely and continually.

"We reach millions around the world."

Interestingly, he said, "It is easier to reach people in other countries." Leonard Peltier support in Russia, for example, is successful because of apparent the U.S. government promotes its concern for human rights. In Spain and Canada, among many countries, Peltier has won awards for human rights.

In Barcelona, Robideau has established the American Indian Movement Museum. ■

Robideau said that he had not seen facilities like those at Grand Ronde on any of the other reservations he's been to. "Most of the reservations I've been to look like dumps. You have a lot to be grateful for."

Robideau and some others volunteered to assassinate Dickie Wilson. After six weeks, the group decided that they didn't know what they were doing, and that anyway, they shouldn't be in the business of killing people.

"To this day, I'm happy about that

attorney, Massachusetts-based Barry Bachrach. But he said that Peltier is not bitter about his imprisonment.

AIM's work blossomed at a time when the traditional Oglala people of the Pine Ridge Reservation lived in terror and poverty while Tribal leaders used federal money to live "the fine



Welcoming — Eagle Beak performs a traditional honor song for A.I.M. member Bob Robideau. Robideau spoke in the Tribe's gymnasium about the importance of knowing your own history and his efforts to gain freedom for fellow Native icon Leonard Peltier.

Photo by Toby McClary

decision. It was the best decision all during that whole period of time. Out of it, we developed a policy of not killing other people."

As the U.S. government had a counter intelligence (Cointelpro) program to infiltrate Black Panthers and white radicals, it also had one against AIM. "Their objective was to criminalize anyone who would stand up," he said.

"The sad part was that some have been corrupted by their success, and in the end, they become oppressors themselves," said Robideau. As the years have passed and the hey-day of AIM efforts fades in the American consciousness, in-fighting focuses many of the AIM experiences of today.

As *News from Indian Country* Editor Paul DeMain has for the last few years sided with government forces against Peltier's claim of innocence, Robideau has challenged DeMain to a one-on-one debate. Former AIM leaders John Trudell and Dennis Banks

life" and oppress the traditionals, said Robideau.

"We (A.I.M.) set out simply with demonstrations to raise consciousness in North America of the problems that we felt needed to be addressed. But nobody listened to us. So we ended up engaging in violent confrontation. That was the only thing, we learned, that this country will listen to."

"How many know the history of the American Indian Movement?" he asked the group when speaking in Grand Ronde. The small response prompted him to ask, "Why? Why don't you know the history of your own movement?"

"Only what you know about yourself as a people can insure your future."

"If you're not aware of what's going on in your world, one day, you are going to wake up and find that you are in fact not free. This is what the American Indian Movement represented to us: our struggle for our freedom."

Robideau said that he had not seen