

Building Aboriginal Economies

April 2002 – Number 1

Harold Alfred

Multifaceted Artist Works in Glass and Gold

by Ruth McVeigh

The Arts

Artists illustrate the past, the present, the future — and the possible. Today, as entrepreneurs, Aboriginal artists are taking charge of both their financial and artistic destinies.

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Portrait

Visit our Aboriginal success stories database at www.inac.gc.ca (Click on "News Room").

Harold (Jackson) Alfred's home in Victoria, B.C., stands out because of the huge, stunning stained-glass creation hanging in the front window. The exquisite design — one of Harold's originals — proudly declares his First Nations heritage. As well as stained glass, this multifaceted artist is a jewellery maker and an experienced carver. His wood sculpting commissions include a totem pole for the City of Duncan, B.C.

For his stained-glass artworks, Harold has collaborated for more than a decade with Victoria resident Kirby (Buzz) Rivest, who has over 30 years' experience working in glass. In their creations, the two partners challenge each other's abilities and imaginations. One project in the planning stage is an enormous window in which the stained-glass pattern incorporates glass bricks. As for Harold's glorious lampshades, the designs have their own magic that takes advantage of the properties of the glass. In daylight, for example, a shade might appear black, with an inlaid salmon motif. Once the light is turned on, however, all the blues and greens of the ocean are revealed.

Harold was born in 1953, into the 'Namgis First Nation of Alert Bay, a member of the Kwakwaka'wakw (Kwakiutl) peoples. Growing up, he was surrounded by outstanding artists and carvers, and his work today reflects their profound influence. Although his designs are deeply rooted in tradition, he constantly strives to express his own particular style, and sets himself the highest possible standards. His logo is the Thunderbird, symbolizing his roots as a 'Namgis artist.



One of Harold Alfred's stunning stained-glass creations.

His extensive training includes studies in fine arts at Malaspina University College in Nanaimo, and courses with the renowned Northwest Coast artist Tony Hunt of the KwaGulth people. Harold took a course in design, one on the fundamentals of carving and another in the fundamentals of jewellery making.

Working in silver and gold, Harold creates one-of-a-kind wedding bands, as well as pendants, rings, bracelets, necklaces and brooches. These items all reflect his respect for tradition, and his personal delight in experimenting with combinations of metal and materials such as abalone and dentalium shell.

Through his collaboration with Adolf Oetter, a certified journeyman metalsmith, Harold sees his original designs engraved on

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Indian and Northern
Affairs Canada

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Canada

Sweet Grass Records Up Where They Belong

by Edwinna von Baeyer

What started as a home-based hobby business in 1993 has taken **Darlene and Ted Whitecalf** into the heart of the Aboriginal music industry. Sweet Grass Records, based in Saskatoon, was first founded to capture traditional music — pow-wow and round dance music — on high-quality recordings.

Ted, a Cree from the Saskatchewan Sweetgrass Reserve, headed the Saskatoon Indian Cultural Centre's audio-visual department and had a firm grounding in traditional music. Darlene, a Chippewa from the Chippewa of the Thames First Nation in Ontario, was a psychological counsellor. Today, Sweet Grass Records represents about 40 different groups — from **Red Bull** to **Whitefish Jrs.**, **Red Dog** to **Stoney Park**. In just eight years, the company has become a leader in the Aboriginal music field.

Sweet Grass did a couple of records which “just took off,” says Darlene of the company's rapid rise in the industry. “Our people were hungry for the music, hungry for top quality recordings,” she adds. The phone soon started ringing, as other groups called wanting to be produced by the company. Within two years, the business had moved into a storefront office where the recordings are made, packaged, marketed and distributed.

Two major names in the music industry played a part in Sweet Grass Records' success: **Buffy Sainte-Marie** and **EMI Music Canada**. Buffy Sainte-Marie has supported the company in many ways, including using various Sweet Grass groups on her own recordings. EMI helped distribute the recordings, signed a major licence agreement with the company, and taught Ted and Darlene the intricacies of contracts.

From the beginning, they concentrated on the quality of the recordings and presentation of the products. What else has contributed to their success? “You have to be prepared to work long hours,” Darlene says, “and you must have a good accountant. It also helps to recognize talent, and to know where to concentrate your efforts. Sweet Grass mostly represents groups that are already on the pow-wow circuit.”

These days, the company is distributing Sweet Grass recordings in the U.S., Canada and Europe, and the business remains strong. Ted and Darlene, now divorced, are still business partners. Two of their four children — daughters **Pamela** and **Carol** — are also involved in the business. In 2000, Pamela won a Canadian Aboriginal Music award for best album cover design for **Little Island Cree's** CD *Indian Country*. Carol, a university



Ted Whitecalf is co-founder of Sweet Grass Records.

student, is redesigning the company's website, as well as helping out in the office.

Sweet Grass Records has received five Juno nominations to date and has been written up in many music periodicals, including the influential *Billboard Magazine*. Since the Canadian Aboriginal Music Awards were first established, Sweet Grass has been nominated every year. In 2000 alone, the company was nominated for seven awards in four categories — and won in three of them. In 2001, Ted received two awards: Lifetime Contribution to Aboriginal Music and the Music Industry Award.

Ever enterprising, Sweet Grass is now branching out into recording Aboriginal music in other genres — a blues CD is in the making.

Visit the company's website at www.sweetgrassrecords.com *

Welcome to our first issue of “Building Aboriginal Economies”. We've changed our name, and our look, to better reflect the new, thriving Aboriginal economy. We'll continue to bring you good news about Aboriginal entrepreneurs, partnerships and achievements in economic development. You can find past stories from “Circles of Light” in our Aboriginal success stories database at www.inac.gc.ca (click on “News Room”).

Ted Longbottom

Celebrating His Métis Ancestors in Song and Story

by Wendy MacIntyre

The *Winnipeg Free Press* has described Métis singer/songwriter/storyteller **Ted Longbottom** as “Manitoba’s unofficial bard,” while Philly Markowitz, host of CBC Radio’s *Roots and Wings*, sees him as “a future Canadian legend.”

With these kinds of accolades, Ted is well on the way to realizing the goal of his powerful songs and stories that dramatize 200 years of Métis history. “Valuing our ancestors is the message,” he says of his desire to reinforce Aboriginal people’s pride in their heritage.

His rich baritone has been compared to the voice of the late, great, Canadian balladeer Stan Rodgers. Ted and his backup band offer audiences uniquely “Canadian music,” fusing Aboriginal rhythms with Celtic jigs and reels.

His first CD, *Longbottom*, brought together 12 songs celebrating the courage, adventurous spirit, skills, hard work and tenacity of Métis traders, buffalo hunters and veterans. Ted’s co-writer is his uncle, **Greg Pruden**, a teacher/historian.

Cuts from his CD have aired on folk-oriented radio programs across Canada, in the U.S., Australia and Ireland. Ted’s music can also be heard on the History Channel’s *Quest for the Bay* series, and on the Discovery Channel’s *Great Canadian Rivers*. His second CD, *River Road*, to be released in 2002, “will honour the English-speaking Métis of Red River.”

Now based in Selkirk, Manitoba, he has performed at many venues across the country, including Toronto’s Harbourfront Centre, the Winnipeg Folk Festival and the Canada Day celebrations on Parliament Hill. But his favourite audiences are children. To teach young people about the history of the Canadian West from an Aboriginal



Ted Longbottom hopes his songs reinforce Aboriginal people’s pride in their heritage.

perspective, Ted has developed an entertaining school program in song and story called *Buffalo Tales*. In traditional Métis clothing, he brings the fur trade era to life in schools, and at children’s festivals Canada-wide. His greatest delight is when Aboriginal

children come up to him after the show and proudly announce their heritage.

Although Ted has been making music as long as he can remember, it was in 1997 that he decided to turn a part-time hobby into a full-time career. That turning point was prompted by a revelation he had at his former job as a counsellor with the Manitoba justice system.

As a liaison between Aboriginal inmates and the Native Brotherhood, which helps Aboriginal people in prison connect with their culture, Ted was often asked by inmates why they had to go to jail to learn about their heritage. “Why wasn’t it taught to them while they were growing up? That question still resonates with me,” he says.

Through *Buffalo Tales*, his CDs, festival performances and website that links visitors to Métis cultural and historical resources, Ted will continue to bring his ancestors’ achievements and cultural heritage to as many people as he can.

For more information, visit Ted Longbottom’s website at www.mts.net/~tlongbot *

“Harold Alfred” continued from page 1

copper. Together, they create striking solid copper bowls ornamented with traditional art forms. These works can be seen in many fine galleries across Canada.

Harold’s focus on developing new designs, and finding innovative ways to employ them, has resulted in an increasingly successful business. His latest venture is with a Vancouver woman who wants to put his designs

on shirts, and even have them etched on glass as corporate gifts.

With his wonderful range of diverse artwork, he has developed an impressive portfolio, and now offers custom designs. Harold’s next plan is to produce a catalogue of his creations for the website he is developing. At present, he can be contacted by e-mail at hjalfred@sprint.ca *

Centre for Indigenous Theatre

Nurturing a New Generation of Aboriginal Actors

by Richard Landis

James Buller had a dream!

Back in the early 1970s, Buller, a member of the Sweetgrass First Nation in Saskatchewan, established the Native Theatre School. His goal? To create an environment that would nourish the creative aspirations of Aboriginal people, and inspire a new generation of writers, actors and directors.

Today, Buller's legacy lives on in the form of the Indigenous Theatre School. Operated by the Toronto-based Centre for Indigenous Theatre, the school offers an introduction to theatre arts. Students can then decide whether they want to commit to the centre's two-year program.

"Our actors' training program provides people of Aboriginal ancestry from around the world with an opportunity to test the waters. We try to help them decide if they want to pursue a career in the performing arts," says **Jani Lauzon**, the Centre's artistic director.

To that end, the Centre's intensive program focuses on various aspects of the arts, including writing, acting, clown techniques, improvisational comedy, contemporary movement, dance, puppetry, voice and Shakespearean text.

"The training isn't easy but neither is a career in the arts," Lauzon cautions. "There are no guarantees in this line of work."

Regardless of the uncertainties of a performing arts career, applicants come from around the world, although most are from Canada. Competing for a coveted spot in the program takes skill and determination. Applicants must audition, or submit an example of their work. They are also required to write a 750-word essay explaining why they want to get into the program.



Students learn many aspects of the theatre arts at the Centre's Indigenous Theatre School.

Those who succeed spend the next two years building a strong foundation in three key areas of the arts: acting in mainstream venues, such as larger theatres, television and film; creating and performing their own stories; and community arts. Students are encouraged to return to their communities, or go to new communities and establish theatre groups using the techniques they've learned to foster self-expression.

"Our purpose isn't to create big film stars. Our goals are to provide students with the skills they'll need to survive in the creative arts, to let them make their own choices and to fuel our own industry by creating our own work and not having to rely on the mainstream industry," Lauzon says.

Unlike university creative arts programs, the Centre offers a culture-based curriculum. Elders and traditional storytellers are an integral part, as are drum making, working with masks, traditional dance and singing.

"It's challenging and a wonderfully rich experience, but it can be overwhelming," Lauzon emphasizes. For that reason, the Centre maintains a close relationship with Toronto's **Native Child and Family Services**, which provides access to counselling for students who find themselves — often for the first time — far-removed from their families and community support systems.

"There are exciting possibilities for people of Aboriginal ancestry to express themselves, to tell their own stories," says Lauzon. "My hope is that, as a people, we can use theatre and theatre techniques to reconnect with the joy of expressing ourselves, the joy of playing, the joy of just being."

For more information, visit the Centre's website at www.interlog.com/~cit/cit.html *

Kehewin Native Performance and Resource Network

Teaching Through Theatre, Story and Dance

by Diane Koven

Melvin and Rosa John found the silver lining in a situation most people would see as a cloud. In the process, they developed a thriving business — the Alberta-based **Kehewin Native Performance and Resource Network** — which transforms Aboriginal history and stories into theatre and dance.

The story began when Melvin decided to enroll in Trent University for a degree program in Native Studies. He and Rosa, then nine months pregnant, packed up their three children and left Alberta for Peterborough, Ontario. A graduate of Trent with a degree in Native Studies and Theatre Arts, Rosa had fond memories of her time there, and the family was eagerly looking forward to the adventure.

But before long, the John children found themselves subjected to teasing and harassment at school. The other students had never known Aboriginal youngsters who had long hair, or who attended cultural events and ceremonies. Then the Johns came up with a novel solution. “We decided that we wanted to go into the school and tell the children about ourselves,” explains Rosa.

The couple was soon in demand. “After a while, other teachers wanted us to go into their classrooms and share our stories,” she recalls. “They went to a teachers’ conference and told other teachers about us, and soon we started travelling around to other schools.” The stories the couple shared on those visits were compiled in a book called *Inside the Circle*.

Turning the stories into theatre was a logical next step. The couple, who both have backgrounds in the theatre, started working with youth from the Curve Lake and Hiawatha First Nations, putting together shows and dance pieces. They then assembled

Kehewin’s dance and theatre group is in great demand throughout North America.



a troupe of seven or eight children, obtained a grant from the Ontario Arts Council, and were on their way.

When Melvin graduated from Trent, both he and Rosa decided to continue their studies at the University of Calgary, so the family headed west again. While in Calgary, they built up a community theatre group of nearly 30 people, and secured grants for costumes, choreography and travel. After the couple completed their master’s degrees in fine arts, the whole family headed back home to the Kehewin Cree Nation in Alberta. Here they run Kehewin Native Performance and Resource Network, with a dance and theatre group that is in great demand.

The group offers Aboriginal theatre, storytelling and pow-wow and contemporary dance performances. The troupe visits schools and community centres, and has performed throughout Canada and the United States. Melvin and Rosa train the performers, some of whom have gone on to careers in television. The John children — **Monique, Jody, Violet and Beany** — as well as assorted nieces, nephews and community youth, are also all actively involved in the family business.

The enterprise reaches out to youth across the country in many ways. “Every year, Kehewin holds a Youth Conference Festival Pow-Wow with performers from many places who come and share their gift with the kids from around here,” Rosa adds.

For more information visit the website at www.knprn.ab.ca *

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Sonny MacDonald

Uncovering Nature's Art Forms

by Tara Lee Wittchen

When most people walk in the bush or along a riverbank, they may notice the tree stumps, fallen branches, rocks, or maybe the odd bone or antler along their path. When **Sonny MacDonald** walks in nature, he sees potential art.

"The concept of the material I use is the simple line concept of carving," says Sonny from his home in Fort Smith, Northwest Territories. "It's using the natural material to my advantage, like using the curvature of a limb on a tree or a root."

He carries a black marking pencil whenever he takes a walk in the bush or countryside, in case inspiration strikes.

"The artist's mind is so very imaginative that when you come across a stump or a horn or anything, you instantly get a picture in your mind," Sonny explains, adding that he makes some marks on whatever material he picks up. "If you don't do that, the idea that you got in that instant may never ever come back to you," he observes.

A Chipewyan Dene, Sonny taught himself to carve in bone, horn, antler, stromatolite marble, stone, ice, snow and wood. His subjects include loons, polar bears, ravens, fish, eagles, drums and waterfalls. He's even transformed two sets of huge moose antlers into a beautiful throne, commissioned for **Pope John Paul II's** visit to the Northwest Territories in 1987.

"You can carve anything," he says. "The worst part is trying to carve a square piece of wood or a square piece

of material and figuring out how you're going to carve an animal or something out of it; whereas, if you can get a piece of an odd-shaped material, be it wood or horn or rock, it seems like the piece of material talks to you."

Sonny has no formal art training; he learned his techniques from experimenting and being observant on the land. He worked as a resource management officer for the territorial government until his retirement two and a half years ago. "I grew up on the land. I hunted and fished and worked the land, and being a resource management officer, you see these little things in life, and that's what I try to depict in my carvings."

He has been selling his carvings for more than two decades now and has participated in art trade shows on three continents. He's been commissioned to carve pieces for former Prime Minister **Pierre Elliot Trudeau**; former Governor General **Ed Schreyer**; **Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh**; the **Legislative Assembly of the Northwest Territories**; **Ducks Unlimited** and others. When tourist business at his shop slows down in winter, he travels to schools and teaches children the



Photo courtesy of Indian Art Centre, INAC.
Photographer: Lawrence Cook

Sonny MacDonald's carving, "Ivory Eagle Head," shows how he is inspired by nature.

basics of carving. He's also the chairperson of the Northwest Territories Art Council and sits on the Mackenzie River Basin Board.

"I can't draw worth a fiddler's fiddle stick, but I can carve anything," Sonny says.

For more information, telephone Sonny MacDonald at (867) 872-5935. ★

Tara Lee Wittchen is a writer and editor of Ojibway and European heritage.

Gallery/Gift Shop Gives Artists Independence

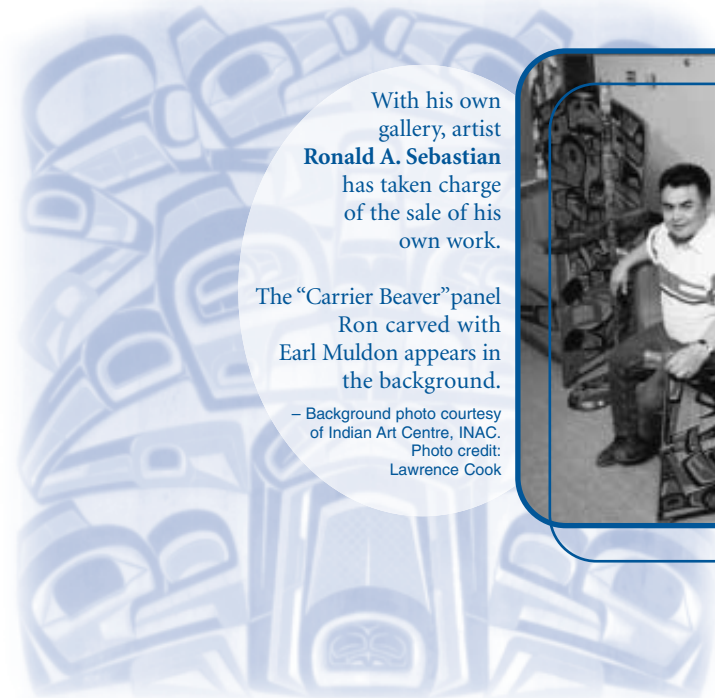
by Wendy MacIntyre

Eight years ago, Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en artist **Ronald A. Sebastian (Gwin Butsxw)** made a momentous decision that was to transform his life and the lives of other artists in the community. Acting on a long-time dream, he bought a log building on Highway 16 in New Hazelton, B.C., and made it into a gift shop and gallery. **RAS Fine Arts** opened on November 26, 1993, displaying Ron's wood carvings, jewellery and prints, and the works of numerous other artists and craftspeople from the area.

The supreme pay-off for Ron and his colleagues is independence. "We got rid of the middlemen," explains his wife, **Tracy Sebastian**, a fellow artist and mother of four, who manages the business. With his works represented in museums and private collections throughout North America and in Europe and Japan, Ron has been a high-profile figure in the world of Aboriginal art for decades. But when he took his new works to big-city commercial galleries, he had the sad experience of many Aboriginal artists. The galleries bought his works for far less than they were worth, and then sold them at an enormous profit for themselves.

"It wasn't fair to the artist," emphasizes Tracy, adding that RAS Fine Arts turned that exploitative situation around. "We're representing ourselves and our own people," she says proudly.

Ron's superb skills in carving and design build on his studies in the early 1970s at the legendary Kitanmax School of Northwest Coast Native Art at 'Ksan Village in Hazelton. His wood carvings include masks, bowls, bent-boxes, talking sticks, rhythm canes, murals and totem poles. His prints, which are also for sale in the gift



With his own gallery, artist **Ronald A. Sebastian** has taken charge of the sale of his own work.

The "Carrier Beaver" panel Ron carved with Earl Muldon appears in the background.

— Background photo courtesy of Indian Art Centre, INAC. Photo credit: Lawrence Cook



shop, have appeared in fine art books. Ron's finely crafted gold and silver hand-carved and -cast jewellery is also in great demand, particularly his unique designs for wedding rings, and for graduation, birthday and anniversary gifts.

His commissioned works include murals, like those he carved with fellow artist **Earl Muldon**, for the lobby of the Indian and Northern Affairs Canada building in Hull, Quebec. For the University of Northern British Columbia in Prince George, he created two elaborately carved Chief's chairs and a talking stick, used on special occasions by the university's president and chancellor, as well as two magnificent carved doors for the university's Senate chambers. The 10-metre totem pole that stands in front of the gallery in Prince George is also Ron's work.

Clients from all over the world commission totem poles from his team of carvers. The RAS Fine Arts

website has an order form that makes it easy for customers to communicate their specifications, and get an idea of the cost involved.

The website definitely helps RAS Fine Arts market its artwork and crafts, confirms Tracy. But in peak tourist season, she says, they get plenty of customers who come to the area "which is perfect for hunting and fishing, and has historical Aboriginal villages."

Although the Sebastians are no longer dependent on other commercial galleries for survival, the road they have chosen is not always easy. "It's a tough business sometimes," Tracy admits. "But working together, it seems like we pull through. I pray every day."

Visit the RAS Fine Arts website at www.northernwoodarts.com ★

Brenda Chambers Showcases Aboriginal Entrepreneurs

by Diane Koven

Brenda Chambers is a successful Aboriginal entrepreneur who has made it her business to showcase other successful Aboriginal business people. Her Vancouver-based production company, **Brenco Media**, produces the new television series, *Venturing Forth* for Aboriginal Peoples Television Network which profiles Aboriginal businesses in all regions of Canada.

With 17 years' experience in Aboriginal broadcasting, Brenda is eminently qualified for this, her latest project. A Tlingit, and member of the Champagne and Aishihik First Nations in the Yukon, Brenda studied broadcasting in Edmonton. After graduating, she returned to the North where she was involved in developing both the CBC Northern Network, and APTN.

In Whitehorse, Brenda started a program called *Nedaa*, while working with Northern Native Broadcasting. This magazine-format documentary series, which aired on CBC North, touched on many important Aboriginal issues. The series was so successful that it was sold to networks across Canada, and then internationally.

Six years ago, after some soul-searching, Brenda decided the time was right for her to take the plunge and start her own business. She established Brenco Media and, before long, had contracts with CBC and other clients. "I know the contacts, all of the Aboriginal producers and technical people in the country," says Brenda. This made it easier for her to launch her business. All the writers, producers and camera operators working for her company are independents, and the majority are Aboriginal.

A one-hour pilot for *Venturing Forth* was very well received, enabling Brenda to secure sponsors for the



Brenda Chambers enjoys bringing inspiring stories of successful Aboriginal entrepreneurs to the public's attention.

amazing enough, even if she were not Aboriginal." Then there is **Corey Hill**, a young Mohawk woman who built and operates a health spa in Ohsweken, Ontario. (See a profile of Corey in our April 2001 issue.)

"I was really inspired by the stories of the people we profiled," Brenda says, "especially the women. There are a number of young women out there starting their own businesses, not waiting for someone to do it for them, but creating something of their own."

Researching the series has introduced Brenda to many outstanding entrepreneurs. "We did 39 profiles across the country," she says. "These people give tremendous amounts to their communities in spite of great odds."

Brenda's own entrepreneurial spirit makes her a natural for finding others like her and they, in turn, help fuel her business success.

For more information, visit the website at www.venturingforth.com *



13-part series. Indian and Northern Affairs Canada is a series sponsor, and also funds a program segment through its Aboriginal Workforce Participation Initiative. The show's second season started in January.

Brenda enjoys bringing inspiring stories of successful Aboriginal entrepreneurs to the public's attention. She says she is in awe of people like **Shirley Dunning**, the owner of Environmental Electronic Electrical Services Inc. in Fort McMurray, Alberta. (See a profile of Shirley in our June 2000 issue.) "A woman in the oil sands, running a technical business in a male-dominated area is



Portrait

“Passion is the Artist”

Michael Lonechild Cree, White Bear First Nation Artist

by Fred Favel

At an early age, I found out what my talent was and it became an obsession for me to do it all the time. I'd still be painting today if I didn't sell anything because I would be doing it for myself. When I look back on how I developed or what kept me going, I kind of used it as a therapy. It was something I could just sit down, forget about everything, and create... There were not limitations to it. Nobody could tell you what to do. It was a personal achievement for myself.

Scenes of years gone by, with log cabins and horse-drawn wagons loaded with logs or trees to be cut for firewood. Children, bundled up and protected from the winter chill. Trappers walking through the woods, horses in the fields and lone wolves stalking the dense brush. The paintings of Michael Lonechild are a refreshing look at the past, a simpler time with no electricity or running water. And for many, perhaps, a happier time.

Michael was born into the White Bear First Nation and remembers life on the reserve with only a hint of nostalgia. “The housing was poor. There was no running water — there was no indoor bathroom. The heating was terrible, especially in the wintertime. I remember that because I hauled a lot of wood. My parents suffered from alcoholism. There were some really rough times when they drank. There were 12 of us in the family and it was kind of tough.” The good times for him involved joining his father outdoors. “He used to take me out with him and we would hunt, trap and fish. And it wasn't because we wanted to do it — there was a necessity — with so many mouths to feed.”

Michael began painting as a result of watching his father and uncle sketch at home. He wanted to do what they were doing. His painting became a serious part of his life when he arrived home from residential school. “I did odd jobs, hauled bales and it was hard work. I was painting and I was selling my art for more than I was making when I was working.” His hobby became his job when he married at 19 and gained responsibilities for a wife and child.

His first real break into the field of art came through Father Joe Suroviak, a Catholic priest Michael affectionately refers to as Father Joe. He was an art connoisseur who had heard of Michael's paintings. “I wanted to sell some art, and I hadn't sold any for a couple of weeks... so I showed him my art and he was quite impressed. He just about bought all of them.” Father Joe indeed bought all of Michael's work at bargain prices that first year, and became his manager. At his first art show in the Estevan City Hall, Father Joe underwrote the expenses and Michael received the balance of the proceeds. Michael has never felt that he was exploited by this relationship, rather Father Joe did much to help establish him in the art business. “He managed me for about four or five years after that. Things really started to pick up — I never had time to go out and work. He kept me painting and focussed.”

As an up-and-coming artist, Michael moved his family off-reserve, to the nearby community of Carlyle where he bought a new home. He began a life of travel and painting, visiting various parts of Canada to exhibit and sell his work at art venues, some of them as prestigious as the Gainsborough Art Gallery in Calgary. He now had

a professional agent, and found his main market in Calgary. He spent several years in this city, painting for different galleries. A major client paid for his paintings up-front. Without having to leave all his work on consignment, Michael was making a good living and could support his family. His travels took him to Toronto, where the eastern market welcomed him as generously as the West. He had arrived and his name became a national one among the artistic set. “Do you have a Lonechild?” was a common question in art circles.

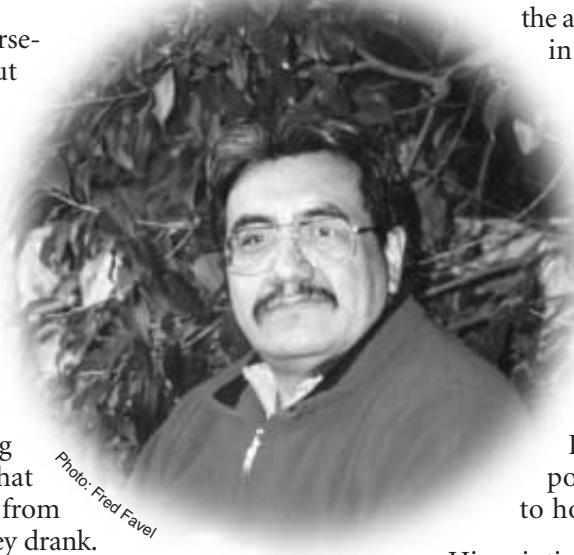


Photo: Fred Favel

The work and the travel did take a toll on his personal life and, as a result, his family broke up. After a few years, he managed to turn his life back around. He remarried and, with his wife Sarah and stepdaughter Teaga, now lives back at White Bear. Michael's passion, his art, is also back on track. He recently put on a show in Washington, D.C., which was sponsored by an Alberta pipeline company.

Although his art still travels across the continent, Michael does not. Instead, he enjoys driving the countryside in his Jeep Cherokee. He is a councillor on the White Bear First Nation council and has responsibility for the housing portfolio. He speaks with pride of the recent improvements to housing conditions.

His painting today is determined by the time he has available. “I can't sit down and start a painting if I know I only have two hours to paint. It takes two hours to think about it. You don't just sit down and start painting. But generally, I try to do at least two a month, the good size ones. The smaller ones don't take that long.” Large pieces take about seven days to complete if he is uninterrupted. Some of his paintings sell for a considerable price. His highest priced masterpiece went to a customer in Arizona for \$8,000 and, on average, his work ranges from \$3,000 to \$6,000.

Michael remains firmly grounded in his own community. He is pleased that there, he is just another person. “I appreciate that. They don't treat me any different. I'm part of the White Bear community.” An interesting development in his career as an artist is that “I'm starting to get clients from my own people now, whereas 10 or 15 years ago it was unheard of except for the odd person.”

Michael is philosophical about his past, and reflects back to his best years. “In the early 80s, financially — because of the tail end of the oil boom in Alberta — they were just giving money away there.” Even so, his paintings are still very much in demand, as can be witnessed by the “sold” markings on the paintings and the limited edition prints he has on his website. “It's a passion for me; it's really hard to stay away from it. There are a lot of things I know I could do yet. People that get famous don't get there when they are young in art. If you go through history, all of the old masters were 80 years old. I haven't even begun to paint yet — that's the way I feel. The really good paintings aren't even in reach yet. I feel that if I keep on with my art, I will become a great painter one day.”

(Michael Lonechild's website can be found at www.lonechild.com)

Fred Favel is an Aboriginal writer and communications consultant.

