

John Two Birds Arbuckle says he lives for his people



story by Sara schwieder

photos by Dan Ladely

"Our legend says that we'll have to come from the woods and feed and clothe the white man again, just like we did when he first came to America . . . only this time, we'll be caring for his spirit," John Two Birds Arbuckle explained, a note of wonder in his voice.

Arbuckle is a former UNL Indian counselor, now an American Indian Movement (AIM) organizer. Since resigning his post in December for "personal reasons," Arbuckle has been traveling, talking, sitting in jail and living for what he calls "my people."

"Indians believe in a circle, we're part of Mother Earth—and everything's out of balance, the psychological reverberations: we started thinking maybe it's not the Indian, maybe it's white society," he said, his hands moving in delicate circles. The cigarette in one hand left smoke circles that drifted lazily to the ceiling of Casey's Other Place.

Arbuckle said whites often say they can't believe Indians are treated badly or that they are discriminated against. Others ask how they can help.

"Jump in your cars and come to Fort Robinson! Some cop facing his own son is not going to be so handy with his billy club . . .

Find out what's really happening," is Arbuckle's answer.

His current project is an organization called the United Indians of Nebraska, composed of all five Nebraska tribes. Arbuckle helped organize it and has great hopes for its effectiveness. He said the group drew up several proposals recently and presented them to state officials who were "pleasantly surprised at such initiative and had to go home and do their homework," according to Arbuckle.

Another thing on Arbuckle's mind is a trial coming up in Scottsbluff. He is charged with carrying concealed weapons and devices to make flammable weapons. A school in Alliance was fire bombed the day before Arbuckle was arrested.

Arbuckle plans to plead innocent if the charges "ever stand up in court," he said. His lawyers has asked for abatement proceedings, a review of evidence against him by the District Court in Scottsbluff.

"Under the circumstances, there's almost no way an Indian can get a fair trial in Scottsbluff," he said. "So we plan to take the case to the higher courts and to the Supreme Court is necessary."

In addition, a restraining order was issued two weeks ago by Federal District Court

Urbom said.

"It's to restrain police officers from apprehending American Indians except under the most obvious infractions," Arbuckle explained. "It's to assure that Indians will get the protection of the most basic of white America's freedoms: The 1st and 14th amendments."

Arbuckle snorts at the mention of "young activists." It's the old people—the grandfathers—who are the Indian militants, he says.

"Why, the old people fought and died fighting the white man," Arbuckle said. "They just want to hold on to the old ways, they want to preserve our culture, our religion and our language."

He said the Indian movement is not moving away from traditional styles, but toward them, and that thought was echoed by the young people who arrived two weeks ago to protest discrimination in Custer, S.D.: Beaded be-feathered and carrying willow bark in small pouches.

Arbuckle was raised in Arizona, part Navaho, Hopi, Sioux, Chippewa and part Irish. His parents were middle-class and he attended a parochial academy until he was 16. His mother once told him that "you'll never make it if you don't assimilate," but he said he began to doubt that when he started "looking around and seeing how badly our people are treated." He later entered the Army and was in the Special Forces in Vietnam for seven years before leaving the service with honors.

He held a post as advisory counselor for disadvantaged students at South Dakota State University before coming to UNL last fall as Indian counselor.

His views on the University are mixed. He doesn't entirely believe that an "Anglo-Saxon" educational institution can organize a sufficient ethnic studies program—an all-Indian school is needed.

"The University is guilty of tokenism, but it's not always their fault. They call you in and say, 'we're really trying'—and they are—but they're so paternalistic," Arbuckle said.

He said he'd offered to teach a course in Indian psychology and religion, which Wesleyan University may offer yet this semester, but that university officials turned it down. Director of Minority Affairs Leroy Ramsey said he never heard a proposal for the course, however.

"Indian studies at NU consists of one man—Webster Robbins," Arbuckle said. "The University should implement an ethnic

About Wounded Knee . . .

"Wounded Knee is significant because of the massacre that occurred there 83 years ago and I think that the over-reaction of the U.S. marshals is much the same as the U.S. Cavalry. The only difference between the two is that the U.S. Cavalry didn't have a national press or a national conscience—they weren't allowed, this time, to do what they did before.

"We look for stepped up activity as far as take-overs and other activities are concerned . . . the Indian people are not going to be ignored."

—John Two Birds Arbuckle

Judge Warren Urbom directed to Scottsbluff officials' handling of the case.

The restraining order required law enforcement officers to Scotts Bluff County to "protect the constitutional rights of plaintiffs who are Indian and Mexican-American," according to Urbom. The order also required officers to allow out-of-state attorneys to represent their clients in Scottsbluff County, as well as permit the plaintiffs' families visit them in jail during regular visiting hours, Judge

studies department, and make a bigger effort to hire more Indian people."

He said the Minority Affairs Department, of which Indian affairs is a part, is too predominantly black, and that "actually, there are more Indians in Nebraska than blacks."

Arbuckle is running in the May election for the Lincoln City Council. He describes his campaign as "low-key," and, designed so low-income people—especially students and minorities—will have a voice on the Council.