

Something Big

How Bert Crowfoot defied the odds to build a media empire

BY CHRIS READING

THE SATISFYING WHAP OF BALL INTO LEATHER GLOVE resounds through the fieldhouse, where young pitchers use elaborate pitching techniques to deliver maximum speed and spin to softballs. Parents and coaches shout encouragement to budding athletes. Fifty or so youngsters laugh and kid each other as they wait their turn in the drill lines.

Outside, it's a typical January night in Alberta: snow, sub-zero temperatures, icy roads, parkas and boots. Inside the Kinsmen Sports Centre, the Edmonton Bandits girls' softball team is totally immersed in the first practice of the season. Coach Bert Crowfoot, with his ever present smile, walks among the teenagers and their parents, giving pointers, answering questions and building confidence. He's been keeping kids focused and intense for 25 years and he's good at it. Some of these families have driven for hours on treacherous roads to get here. Before the practice, parents tell Bert that their girls have spoken of little but softball for a week.

Joining tonight's practice are a few girls whose teams will be competing against the Bandits once the season begins—something Crowfoot encourages. He believes better competition makes his own team stronger. And he extends this philosophy into his phenomenally successful business, the Aboriginal Multi-Media Society of Alberta (AMMSA), the media empire he launched in Edmonton almost 20 years ago.

Having already come up with the name "AMMSA" for his media business, Crowfoot later discovered it sounded similar to "umsa"—Cree for "something big." Since Crowfoot is Siksika and does not speak Cree, his choice was fortuitous. Over the years, AMMSA has indeed



become something big—also something of a think tank, with Crowfoot and his managers constantly developing new ideas for aboriginal media. AMMSA's publication arm has now diverged into three. *Windspeaker* delivers "hard" news to his readers, using its editorial and journalistic clout to bring native and non-native politicians to task at the national level. The three provincial newspapers, *Alberta Sweetgrass*, *Saskatchewan Sage*, and *Raven's Eye* in British Columbia, offer a "soft," community-oriented news

approach. *Buffalo Spirit*—a monthly aboriginal culture and spirituality magazine and Crowfoot's newest publication—crosses physical and political boundaries and finds direction in issues of heart and spirit. Issuing also from AMMSA headquarters in Edmonton, CFWE-FM broadcasts native programming across Alberta. Crowfoot and his managers have also created Aboriginal Media Services to help connect potential advertisers and businesses with aboriginal publishers and broadcasters across the country. An award-winning website showcases the entire operation to the world.

But AMMSA's flagship remains *Windspeaker*, whose monthly circulation has recently increased from 18,000 to 20,000, about 85 per cent of which is in prepaid subscriptions. Easily the most recognized native publication in Canada, *Windspeaker* is the perfect forum for writers looking for a national native audience. For the interested observer, it's a useful window into modern aboriginal life in Canada. For aboriginal readers, it's an all-purpose magazine, covering health, sports, entertainment, opinion and, of course, news. Its extensive news section covers events across North America.

BACK IN 1983, CROWFOOT HAD BEGUN PUBLISHING a bimonthly magazine with a focus on northern Alberta. He incorporated it under the Alberta Societies Act as a non-profit enterprise, which it remains today. The mid-1980s were the waning years of massive government spending, and aboriginal publications that had survived mainly through heavy subsidies now faced the prospect of leaner government at both the federal and provincial levels. In 1987, the Alberta government announced that it would gradually eliminate subsidies to native communications over the next three years. Crowfoot began preparing for the inevitable and developed a five-year plan for economic self-sufficiency. Three years into his five-year plan,

ALBERTA IS HOME to more aboriginal publishing and broadcasting than any other place in the world.

the federal government pulled its funding, giving publishers only six weeks to find new money.

With provincial funding phased out and federal money about to dry up, Crowfoot realized that the survival of his publication depended upon immediate, decisive action. On the very day of Ottawa's announcement, he cut his staff of 24 in half. While many other aboriginal newspapers (mostly owned by non-natives) directed their energies to lobbying both levels of government to reverse their deci-

sions, Crowfoot's took another road and intensified its self-sufficiency efforts. Before 1990, there had been almost a dozen aboriginal magazines and newspapers publishing in Canada, all with considerable government funding. (Crowfoot describes the financial support from government as fostering a "welfare mentality" that prevented most of these organizations from adjusting to new economic realities.)

A contingency fund Crowfoot had built up in previous years, coupled with a leaner, more efficient workforce, allowed the magazine to weather these new conditions, placing it in an excellent position to expand. In 1993, it restructured and evolved, broadening out of Alberta into a Canada-wide publication, eventually named *Windspeaker* through a contest won by Terry Lusty, an AMMSA journalist. (AMMSA, which had been the original paper's name, became the overall name of the entire, growing organization.) By 1994, Crowfoot's organization had turned the corner and begun to operate in the black with zero government funding. Of the 11 aboriginal publications operating in Alberta before the cuts, only two survived.

Subsidy-free aboriginal publishing in Alberta, according to Crowfoot, has helped create an exceptionally competitive environment, responsible for a lively marketplace for producers and advertisers. Not only does Alberta now lead the way in First Nations media in Canada, Crowfoot says, Alberta is home to more aboriginal publishing and broadcasting than any other place in the world. Competition creates stronger players, he says, and the bottom line is "the readers win in the end."

Still, *Windspeaker* stands out for a number of reasons. It is one of the very few native publications in western Canada that are actually native-owned and operated. But it is content that really distinguishes it from the rest. Serious commitment to news and editorial content mean

that 100 per cent of *Windspeaker's* news is written by its own staff or freelance journalists, while non-native owned papers have unusually high ratios of advertising to content and often rely heavily on wire services and very little staff. Crowfoot's reputation throughout Indian country for personal integrity and commitment to journalistic objectivity,



AMMSA's Edmonton building houses the operations of several publications and an FM radio station.

means that he has little trouble attracting top writers. About 10 per cent of *Windspeaker's* circulation is sent without charge to band offices and native friendship centres across the country. Irene Morin, operations manager at Enoch Cree Nation, east of Edmonton, says "it's by far the most popular native publication on the reserve. Our copies disappear out of the band office immediately. The other papers are mostly ads, but *Windspeaker* carries a lot more real news than the other native papers." My calls to individual reserves in different parts of the country elicited similar response.

Commitment to providing useful aboriginal content means that *Windspeaker* channels significant resources into the area of aboriginal health. Diabetes rages through native communities at three to five times the Canadian average. Heart disease, obesity, substance abuse, smoking, hepatitis, HIV and AIDS infections, tuberculosis and accidental death rates also run well above the Canadian average. The dissemination of health and wellness information to a native readership is a vitally important service. So, in 1999, *Windspeaker* ran a full year of diabetes coverage.

Already appearing in every issue was "The Medicine Bundle," a column of medical advice contributed by Dr. Gilles Pinette, a prominent Métis doctor from Manitoba. His column is written in accessible, jargon-free language about a full range of health issues, from flu shots to the sad legacy of residential schools that have left many individuals damaged across the full spectrum of human experience. *Windspeaker* editor Debora Lockyer Steel says that, since native health problems often overlap each other, the publication wanted a medical professional with a holistic approach to medicine. Dr. Pinette's conventional medical training, combined with his background in traditional native healing and spirituality, made him a natural choice.

Dr. Pinette believes that the native concept of the medicine wheel (its four quarters represent the physical, emotional, spiritual and intellectual aspects of life) is an essential tool for bringing lives back into balance. "The body, mind and soul need to be carefully balanced for us to have wellness. If an area of our life is in crisis or imbalance, emotional trauma from past abuse, for example, then other areas of our medicine wheel will need to compensate or they too will suffer."

Supreme Court decisions, struggles over land and resources, residential school abuses, constitutionally guaranteed aboriginal rights and a generally better educated and politically savvy leadership mean that native news items now infiltrate mainstream news to a degree almost unimaginable a generation ago. Crowfoot's response to the growing market for political news and opinion from an aboriginal perspective has been to keep a slate of full-time journalists on staff as well as maintaining working relationships with dozens of freelance writers across North America.

In *Windspeaker's* popular column "To:ske" (Mohawk for

"It's True"), readers are challenged to think about issues such as traditional aboriginal self-determination, environmentalism, and government by consensus. The man behind "To:ske" is Dr. Taiaike Alfred, a Kahnawake Mohawk whose credentials include a successful tour in the U.S. Marines and a PhD from Ivy League Cornell



CFWE-FM on-air personality Wally Desjarlais

University. He is currently director of the indigenous governance program at the University of Victoria.

Alfred regularly challenges aboriginal readers to consider alternatives to European patterns of thought and behaviour that have proven unsuitable for native purposes. In a recent column, he used the occasion of a hunting trip to his in-laws' ancestral lands in northern British Columbia to reiterate the importance of traditional values. He gently reminded his wife's relatives that hunting from the front seat of a pickup truck lacks the respect for animals and the environment that traditional hunting represents and is better left to the non-native hunters who introduced it. Hunting becomes a metaphor for the traditional ways of thought and action that must be recovered in order for First Nations to survive, a message of cultural survival delivered in deceptively uncomplicated language.

Yet Taiaike Alfred has another, tough, intellectual side, representative of the sharp political edge of First Nations "hard" news and opinion published in *Windspeaker* every month. Growing up in Kahnawake, one of Canada's most activist First Nations communities, he, like many of its young Mohawk warriors, considered a stint in the American armed forces, the Marines in particular, a rite of passage. When an Ivy League doctorate and former Marine delivers a message, written or spoken, it is, not surprising-

ly, delivered in a manner simultaneously combative and thoughtful.

In the fall of 2000, I witnessed Alfred's willingness to engage the enemy on the stage of the University of Alberta's packed Myer Horowitz theatre. Alfred shared the stage with Assembly of First Nations Grand Chief Matthew Coon Come (to whom he is a close advisor), and brought the house down with several well-placed jabs at the Canadian Alliance party's Indian policies. On hearing a rumour that former Reform party Indian affairs advisor Tom Flanagan might be in the audience, Alfred issued a direct challenge to him to debate the native issues Flanagan regularly writes about in the *National Post*, a paper many First Nations people consider hostile to native points of view. A deathly silence followed the challenge until it appeared Mr. Flanagan was not in attendance. We were unfortunately denied an opportunity to witness what would have surely been an enlightening exchange between two articulate spokesmen holding diametrically opposite

TAYLOR DIDN'T BITE. "Anybody who looks and dresses like George Custer is a marked man."

positions on Canada's "Indian question."

Among peoples with long histories of oppression, humour has become a kind of cultural safety valve for letting off steam, and anyone who has spent time among native people is certainly aware that their humour is both idiosyncratic and ubiquitous. Drew Hayden Taylor, humour columnist for *Windspeaker*, is an Ojibway from the Curve Lake reserve in Ontario. His contributions provide the artistic yin to Taiaike Alfred's rational/political yang. Taylor's plays, television credits and books of published essays are well known throughout Indian Country in Canada. His *Windspeaker* columns, often reprinted in more mainstream newspapers in southern Ontario, read like hilarious stream of consciousness ramblings through his daily life. In one column, he considered, at length, the weighty question of what he had done to deserve a girlfriend who was a) an intellectual (PhD candidate), b) aboriginal (Mohawk) and c) a babe (Toronto Argonaut cheerleader). He concluded that even if he didn't know what it was, he was happy to be the beneficiary of such good luck. Another column, "The Dating Game—Who Should Date Whom in the Native Community" responded to a question posed to Taylor by a campus radio station host in Edmonton. Why, she wondered, did so many successful native men seem to date and marry non-native women? After reflecting back through his last four rela-

tionships, Taylor answered, he couldn't explain why, but did discover a slightly unsettling pattern to his own dating trajectory: his first girlfriend was native, the second was half native/half white, the third Filipina and the fourth white. "If this trend keeps up" he wrote, "my next girlfriend will be either an albino or an alien."

Another of Taylor's columns grew out of the events surrounding his and Alberta writer W.P. Kinsella's invitation to the Toronto International Festival of Authors. At the time, he was besieged by friends who demanded he make Kinsella aware of how upset native Canadians were by what they consider excessive appropriation of native culture and unsympathetic characterizations of native people in Kinsella's stories. MuchMusic video reporters even tried to create controversy by asking both men identical questions and then airing their answers back to back on television. Taylor refused to rise to the bait, saying that he had no reason to go after Kinsella. Besides, he figured "that anybody who looks and dresses like George Armstrong

Custer is a marked man anyways." In a later piece, he wrote that natives in Canada are divided into two camps regarding Mr. Kinsella: the first sees him as aboriginal enemy number one, "while those natives who work on the CBC show *The Rez*, believe he's the second coming of Shakespeare."



Windspeaker editor Debora Lockyer Steel

CROWFOOT'S ROUTE TO SUCCESS HAS BEEN AS SINGULAR as his management style. Growing up on the Siksika reserve near Calgary during the 1950s and '60s, Crowfoot and his siblings faced two quite distinct realities. The reserve had its share of all too common problems: poverty, unemployment, substance abuse and substandard education. But life inside the Crowfoot household was remarkably different. Crowfoot's parents ran a successful farming operation and instilled a solid work ethic in each of their 10 children. They worried that their children could not realize their full potential in an environment they felt did not only not reward achievement but was rife with other dangers.

When he reached the age of 12, Crowfoot's Mormon parents chose to follow a Mormon practice and send him and several of his siblings from the family farm in southern Alberta to live with non-native Mormon families in various locations around the province. The Crowfoot chil-

dren were accepted into the host families, where the values of hard work, education and achievement, so prized by Crowfoot's parents, were reinforced in familial, though non-native, environments. Bert Crowfoot describes the experience as an overwhelmingly positive one—the families were loving and nurturing—but one he could not, as a parent, bring himself to have his own children repeat. Bert points to his family's achievements as proof of his parents' wisdom. His nine siblings have 22 degrees among them. There are two dentists, an engineer, several master's degrees, and a battery of undergraduate degrees. Crowfoot himself, a physical education student at Brigham Young University in the 1970s, was drawn to sports psychology. After university, Crowfoot returned to Alberta where he has been coaching softball and working in First Nations media ever since.

While the rest of the Crowfoots excelled scholastically, Bert discovered his passion for coaching had practical applications in the business world. A sports-based vernacular is permanently embedded in Crowfoot's business vocabulary. "As a coach, you don't necessarily look for the best ball players. It's better for the team to find good athletes, fit them into the team, and give them a chance to develop into great ball players."

For Crowfoot, running a successful media business is perfectly analogous to coaching baseball. When he first set up *Windspeaker*, he chose employment candidates with the prized qualities of aggressiveness, competitiveness and solid work ethic, rather than the most experience. When asked about his own competition in the business, Crowfoot says that managing according to a team-based strategy means "we don't have competition; we're confident enough in ourselves [that] readers and advertisers will decide who has the best product."

Crowfoot's management team runs AMMSA according to an aggressive business plan. A province-wide bingo operation remains a significant revenue generator—something in the range of \$100,000 annually, after winnings are paid out. Bingo revenues are strictly regulated by Alberta gaming regulations and AMMSA's status as a non-profit organization means that financial surpluses are plowed back into the organization. Bingo revenues are used to finance AMMSA's rapidly expanding Alberta-wide radio operation. Approximately 46 small towers bring aboriginal radio programming to every native and Métis community in Alberta and as funds come available, AMMSA constructs larger transmitters to replace the many smaller ones. A major transmitter at Fort Macleod covers all of southern Alberta, while 120-metre, 100-kilowatt towers in Slave Lake and Moose Lake bring signals to northern and northeastern Alberta respectively. AMMSA's marketing director, Paul Macedo, estimates more than \$500,000 will be invested in radio infrastructure over the next several years.

The development of AMMSA's award winning website is

a good example of why Crowfoot has flourished where others have floundered. Designed and maintained by its own Aboriginal Media Services, the website has attracted international attention. In early 1995, Crowfoot went shopping for an official website. After discovering that outside designers wanted \$60,000 to do the job, Crowfoot decided to keep the project in-house and asked marketing manager/graphic designer Paul Macedo to take a crack at web design. By August 1996, he had North America's first comprehensive online aboriginal website up and running. The site attracted attention from outside organizations, and eventually AMMSA landed the contract to create and maintain canab.com, the official website of the Canadian Aboriginal Festival held annually in Toronto's Skydome.

Crowfoot and his managers try to staff his operations with as many native prospects as they can, and have been able to consistently attract good people from the aboriginal community. At least once a year, students enrolled in the now defunct native communications program at Edmonton's Grant MacEwen College were treated to a tour of the AMMSA facility and a meeting with Crowfoot himself. Program director Jane Woodward says this type of experience gives media/journalism students a chance to see real aboriginal media in action. With AMMSA's excellent reputation among aboriginal journalists, both as a native-owned operation and for welcoming new journalists, it was a natural step for some graduates of the Edmonton school to begin their careers at one of Crowfoot's papers or the radio station.

Committed to the continuing growth of aboriginal media in Canada, Crowfoot has, in fact, forged formal and informal links with First Nations teaching facilities across the country. He regularly visits the communications program at Saskatchewan Federated Indian College in Regina and is occasionally a guest lecturer at the First Nations Technical Institute in Tyendinaga Mohawk Territory near Kingston, Ontario. He was involved with the native com-



CFWE-FM on-air personality Norman Quinney

munications program at Grant MacEwen College until it and other aboriginal programs fell victim to college restructuring at the end of the 1999-2000 academic year.

However, with the rise of newer organizations like the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network and as native issues move into the mainstream of Canadian news, the demand for qualified and experienced aboriginal journalists across the country has become ever more robust. This has created a new challenge for Crowfoot: to keep talented young media graduates on staff when the wider opportunities and higher pay of more mainstream radio and television jobs are regularly offered to them. *Windspeaker's* high profile means it is sometimes used as a stepping stone.

"A lot of good people have begun their careers at AMMSA and have gone on to great success in other places," says Crowfoot. Recent alumni have taken positions with CBC radio and a local Edmonton television station. Crowfoot says the relatively high turnover of young aboriginal journalists at AMMSA, in fact, reflects a healthy market for First Nations news in Canada. "The growth of aboriginal media helps us all."

Windspeaker editor Steel says the paper has accepted and

AS NATIVE ISSUES move into mainstream Canadian news, demand for aboriginal journalists increases.

is proud of its role as a launching pad for new aboriginal media talent, and that with the oral tradition such a deeply entrenched part of aboriginal culture, it is natural for many young aboriginal journalists to want to follow the path from print to radio and television. From a managing point of view, occasional headaches that arise from staff turnover are more than compensated by the good energy that young writers bring to the work place.

ON A 1999 ROAD TRIP THROUGH THE WESTERN U.S. and Canada, Crowfoot found himself at the site of a protest organized by natives, farmers and environmental groups against an Alberta government plan to dam the Little Bow River. The buffalo jump and about three hundred pre-contact archaeological sites all lay within the proposed flood area. He attended a traditional Siksika sweat at the bottom of the jump. (Native sweats are intense physical ordeals that often trigger spiritual journeys. One of Canada's most acclaimed architects, Douglas Cardinal, constructs a sweat lodge wherever his architectural commissions take him and credits some of his greatest buildings—Hull's Museum of Civilization, for example—to the

spiritual journeys that take place in the intense heat of the sweat.)

The experience of the sweat, coupled with the recognition of the tragic cultural loss that would result from the flooding, led Crowfoot to decide that a new magazine would be dedicated to preserving what remained of North American aboriginal culture and spirituality. The result, *Buffalo Spirit*, a monthly aboriginal culture and spirituality magazine, is considerably removed from "hard" news coverage and political opinion. Crowfoot believes the hearts and minds of native elders represent the greatest connection between the native past and present. Inviting elders to speak in their own words about traditional rituals, practices and languages represents the best strategy to preserve the heart of whatever native spirituality remains. The goal is to help North America's first people to remain aboriginal in the face of overwhelming odds. By allowing elders to bring specific spiritual and cultural issues in their own voices to younger audiences, a publication such as *Buffalo Spirit*, he believes, can offer an even more effective challenge to the status quo than political action.

It's an approach typical of Crowfoot, whose style in business and life is consistent in its non-conformity and entrepreneurial flair. A competent coach, he says, can



develop a good athlete into an excellent ball player. Crowfoot has spent the past two decades turning enthusiastic individual employees into a successful First Nations media team. It's telling that, of the hun-

dreds of trophies Crowfoot has won in 25 years of coaching ball in Alberta, only a handful are on display in his offices at home and work. The rest he gives away to First Nations schools around the province, where they are given new life as student achievement awards. Given that record of confidence building, it's not surprising he receives many heartfelt letters from athletes and parents. They are his most cherished mementoes; he's kept every last one.

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