

## Aboriginals and Chinese: Then and Now Elder Norman Running Rabbit

---

Norman Running Rabbit, a member of Treaty 7 Blackfoot, was born in 1939 and raised on the Siksika Nation. His native name as a child was Si-Bisto (Owl) while his adult name is Me Som Si Bisto (Forever Owl). The 'Running Rabbit' is a big family with Irish blood and of Electricians, Plumbers, and Carpenters.

"We, Running Rabbit, come from a good family, a large family. Friendly and not selfish. We are people of compassion", he said continuing, "We had a good chief, Chief Running Rabbit, for 19 years. Right after Chief Crowfoot, Running Rabbit, he passed away when he was 97 years old. Stories that were told to me, Chief Crowfoot, still young at the time, he depended on Running Rabbit, as his right hand man."

In 1956, at the age of 16 years old, Norman completed residential school. The Department of Indian Affairs rules when you have reached your 16<sup>th</sup> birthday you are considered as completed residential school. He chose a path to leave the reserve to work in the 'white' industry. The time he decided to leave, Norman left the reserve on a passenger train. With 65 cents in his pocket he gave up 35 cents and headed to Calgary. He slept at Sally Ann's (Salvation Army) for 10 cents a night and a meal. "My grandparents were sad...I was warned by my grandparents and family that it was dangerous out there". In, 1958, at the young age of 19 years old, he moved to the Artic, The Land of the Midnight Sun, to work for six and half months, for that period of time, he was only 800 miles from the North Pole. He went to the DEW line (Distant Early Warning) stations being the only indigenous person among over 700 white people working there at the time. He worked for the white industry for 40 years before returning home on the Siksika Nation.

As the first Aboriginal Probation and Parole Officer in Alberta, Norman also worked for the City of Calgary. He even worked at a Husky gas station, where Peter's drive-in now sits. Working and the life experiences was really good for him. He said, "I did not take any bull from anybody. I am a hard-headed person. I learned the white ways of the white people. When the bad things started to happen to me, I turned the tables and used them against them [white people]. They backed off from me."

Norman was hesitant to tell his stories because of trust – this is his first time telling his stories. He said, "White people always stealing our stories. Our stories are not to be repeated or disrespected or to be passed on. Our stories require permission to be shared. We have pride and values, which are very important to us. We never point fingers, we never name names. We are who we are, and we are generous people, 'Nizitapi' or the Real People - that's the first value. We are swayed by these words of white people where you doubt your own values. Almost, destroyed our lives." Although, Norman is fluent in English, he prefers his mother

tongue Blackfoot during the whole interview. He continued, "Blackfoot language is a mouth full. Words are so long and hard to translate some concepts into English."

### **The Connections Between Aboriginals and Chinese in Siksika First Nation**

Stories of where they come from is told by a young man (unknown) and confirmed by his grandparents and Elders. Norman said, "The 'Real People' Blackfoot are known by this NAME because they are compassionate."

Norman said, "We help people and we take them into our membership to become part of our Reserve and throughout our first nation's lands...We come from the point of Siberia, originating from Mongolia (bordered by China and Russia). I heard the stories when I was just a young boy; when I learned to read - I found out." Norman continued, "We travelled through the shallow of the Bering Strait. We must have stayed around there -before we entered the Baffin Seas to go around North West Passage along Alaska. We went through (now known as) Hudson's Bay, North of Winnipeg, Manitoba. We were a large tribe; we settled in Red River Valley, Manitoba, the area of Winnipeg today. There were many other tribes that challenged us to war, like the hostile Iroquois. We travelled on through Saskatchewan- through Big Sandhills (Our Heaven) known as Drumheller."

"We rule because of the size of our population at the time. To describe it, 'for as far as we can see, over the hills, and more, that is the size of our Nation' - that is the size of the Blackfoot Nation. This is why the Navajos, the Apaches, the Arapahos, we went through their land without war. We were a nation respected as an aggressive military force. They knew how big our nation was. We occupied and owned, to this day, the Yellowstone Park. At the time there was only a small portion of our people occupied the land. When the government came the 'Blackfeet' Nation was formed."

Norman continued, "Chief Charlie Running Rabbit was the main chief of that area. We were explorers and found the passage to Banff and west coast of B.C. We occupied and ruled most of the land West Manitoba."

***"I was just a little guy so that was hard to describe when I heard it...hearing we come from Chinese ground. Based on the ways of our life, we have similarities".***

Norman discloses that the Chinese present their history very well. He said, "I listen to our grandparents' stories and there's not much difference in their description with association with the Chinese. Just from the top of my head, first of all, I'd like to tell you, you can record it. But don't allow anyone to copy it or take it."

Norman remembered that the First Nation of Siksika was very generous and welcomed the Chinese as they started arriving in a way Chinese children mingled with Aboriginal children and played together. He said, "They treated us so good they fed us. Some of the Chinese children had bikes and Aboriginal children had horses. So we traded bikes and horses."

Norman said, "Chinese hunted and fished a lot on the reserve". They didn't have to worry about getting fishing and hunting license. Norman continued, "If Chinese were questioned they would say they were gifts from us." There was a natural understanding and a natural bond between Aboriginal and Chinese.

***Besides the history, sharing the values of generosity, language's similarities, similar eating habits, mutual trust and respecting older generations play the vital part with which Aboriginal and Chinese people get along.***

Some of the verbal emotional expressions between Blackfoot and Chinese are so alike. Norman recalled an incident when he went to play bingo and said, "There was a young Chinese couple sat beside me. The girl was so excited, and I could tell this was the first time this young lady has played bingo. She was waiting for one number, and someone from the end of the hall called "BINGO"; she screeched 'Ai yaah!' with disappointment when she didn't win." Some of these expressions, such as, 'ai yah', are so similar between Blackfoot and Chinese to express exclamation of shock or disappointment.

The history of the construction of the CPR, relating to Chinese, has been well known. Norman shifts his focus briefly back to the memories of stories of many young, teen Chinese workers building the tracks of the CPR. He said, "Chinese people were starving and dying at young age in that period. Siksika people came across sick and dead Chinese bodies along the side of the railroad. The sick ones were brought back to Siksika." Norman added, "When the railroad went through the Reserve, and when it was completed; the Chinese started arriving and wanted to stay and live on nation land."

### **In Small Towns Surrounding Siksika Nation**

Norman remembers some of the names of Chinese people who lived in the nearby towns surrounding Siksika Nation.

He said, "Louie and Jimmy Hong were the 'cooks' for the crew of farmers and helpers in Cluny. There were also Cookie and Harry's Cafe in Vulcan; Bassano had Lenny's restaurant and Harry's restaurant; Siksika had Lou and brothers, Harry and Jackie."

Particularly, "Louie Hong got off at a good place here. Louie would always order a lot of stock and stuff for his store. He and his wife, they got rich off this land. His wife travelled back and

forth to Vancouver and Louie would sometimes travel with her too.” Norman continues, “Louie would have left-overs because he ordered too much like food, clothing, machinery, and equipment...In the early 1960’s, as I remember, Hollywood people found out at the time they were filming western movies, maybe natives were cowboys, I don’t know, but a wagon trailer came and took everything of worth from Louie’s store.”

Norman reiterated Louie Hong as ‘Native people are good people’. He said, “We had good relationship, always got along with each other. The fact is, we have similarities, background and history. We got along without saying ‘you Chinese’.”

Some Chinese people were being initiated into ‘Prairie Chicken Society’ a prestigious society. Norman said the First Nations never discriminated others. “Instead, they shopped more at the Chinese stores which caused friction between the Chinese and white people. The white people were jealous.”

Norman said “Chinese people were generous with their food then; and now, right today, they are stingy with their money.”

“There was another Chinese family, across the tracks, they were the Kwong (phonetic spelling) family who owned a store. Charlie and his brother Fred Kwong. Charlie was a generous man but his brother Fred was not so generous. When Charlie passed away, Fred took over the restaurant. They, the Kwong’s had a vehicle, and Charlie would drive coal miners home for 5 cents.”

Norman said, “Charlie was the one who would give my dad and his brothers work, who are both carpenters, to renovate the store. They had the freedom of helping themselves to the store.” His dad would tell Charlie ‘I took this much’, and at that time, his dad would drive and deliver food supplies.

When Norman was young, he would go into town of Cluny to buy a whole chunk of baloney. Norman joked that, “Today you only get a few slices and just as you start to enjoy it’s all gone.” Eating habits show similarities too. Louie sold kidney too. Norman recalled, “Louie would say ‘come and eat Norman’, what do you want, Kidney?” Norman used to jokingly tell Louie not to wash the tripe so clean.

The Aboriginals and Chinese got along in Cluny, and so as in Gleichen. Norman said, “We got along with Lou, Jackie, and Harry.”

Jackie owned a confectionery corner store in Gleichen. He had a jukebox and an area for dancing. In the 1960s’, it was a popular hangout for Aboriginal youth.

When mutual trusts were established well between two nations, lives became simple. Norman recalled that the Chinese merchants would allow Aboriginal customers to take what they need on credit – sometimes by just writing down what they took and paid the bill later.

Norman said, “The thing is, seems to me, the Chinese people - once they know you - they tell you, ‘just help yourself you know where it is, little stuff like that.’” A ration of \$8.00 a month was distributed to each Nation member...trust would be “they would take what they need and write down on a pad what they take.”

Norman continues, “Chinese are humans just like us. We never argued with the Chinese people. They were good to us.”

Today, Norman continues to eat at Chinese restaurants. He still has a lot of Chinese friends and he still associates with them. But he adds that the “older Chinese people I once knew are dying off.”

The fact is the Chinese people and Aboriginal people believe that respecting elders are very important to the community and society, and this is why they get along. Norman said, “We share the same values and beliefs, ways of life. Chinese people want to accomplish the same as we do.”