

PS

Dear Chief Williams :

This page is "off the record", please.

I feel that I should express to you my own personal (and professional) views on the proposed North West Development schemes and how they will likely affect your people at Kitwancool in particular, and your fellow Indian people in general. In fact, much of what I am going to say applies to all permanent northern residents.

The entire northern development question and the very pressing one of Native Rights and Land Claims is what is essentially on my mind. I am quite familiar with this whole question, having worked for some time for the Union of Chiefs, for two Indian District Councils, etc. prior to working in my present capacity on the railroad aspect of northern development. As I see it, there are two important considerations which the proponents of "northern development" wish to ignore : 1) Indian Land Claims and socio-cultural considerations, and 2) the need to carefully consider the effect of such industrial expansion upon the rivers, lakes, fish, wildlife, and general beauty of this, your living space, the wonderful wilderness of Northern British Columbia.

If your identity -- and the perpetuation of that identity -- is important to you and your people, if you wish your culture and language to continue on to future generations, if life only has real meaning when you feel you have strong cultural roots, then I believe that your land claim is of utmost importance. As you well know, and as I notice Wilson Duff mentions, if it becomes necessary for the members of your band to move hundreds of miles away to study and to work, and if they have to raise their families away from the Kitwanga valley, within one generation they will be Kitwancools no more. (We are all a product of our surroundings, our upbringing, in the final analysis. We are what we learn...from the TV set or from our elders; depending upon which is the closer and more persuasive!)

The Kitwancool Land Claim, as I see it, is a means to guarantee your people a future. From a cultural-historical standpoint, the land in question is of extreme importance to you. From a legal standpoint, it is rightfully still yours. And from a practical standpoint, possession of land is the best assurance of a future one can have. However the world's economy and technology might change, human life still depends upon the land. Wise use of land and that which grows upon it is the only real assurance mankind has of surviving. And, industrial development has proven to be a very damaging form of land use!! Clearcut logging on the scale practised in recent years is very harmful to the land (erosion, nutrient run-off, humus depletion) and to the fish and wildlife that are dependent on the forests for their survival. Clearcut logging is particularly harmful to spawning grounds for salmon, and thus harmfully affect the commercial fishing & canning industry. Man's right hand fouling up the efforts of his left hand?

By establishing your Land Claim, by making it clear in law to all concerned, by reaffirming your right to determine who should do what, where, when and how on the lands in question, you thereby guarantee that if anyone is going to misuse that land and its resources it will at least be yourselves, the Kitwancools, the rightful owners!! The whiteman (industrial man, to be more accurate) has quite a talent for "fouling his own nest". His technology is so powerful nowadays that he can literally "move mountains" with little human effort. If he had the WISDOM to go with it, there would not be any real problem, of course. But experience has indicated that this wisdom is decidedly lacking. Industrial man acts, he does not think. He destroys much better and more readily than he creates. He is insensitive to Nature.

My people, Chief Williams, those of the "industrial society", are not wise users of land. Nor do they seem to really look toward the future and plan today's activities so that things will be better tomorrow, rather than maybe a bit worse. Industrial man seems to want to conquer mother Nature; not live off of her, survive alongside of her, and grow with her. Industrial man seems determined to both "kill the hen that laid the golden egg" and, unlike any bird in existence, he seems intent upon permanently "fouling his own nest" — the earth.

So, Chief Williams; I am trying to plead with you that, not only would it be a guarantee of a future for your people if you would act now and make it explicit in law that the land claimed by the Kitwancools is infact owned by them; but then it would be a guarantee of a future for my people too. Under your system of land use the earth, water and air would survive; not necessarily under ours I'm afraid. Just travel around North America, even just B.C., and this becomes blatantly obvious. What will things be like in another 20 or 40 years at the rate things have been going in the last 20 years?

Now, from a legal and political standpoint: if you allow the highway to go across your land before a land settlement, your case will be very much weakened. The Nishgas are insisting, rightly, that their claim be settled first (that they be recognized as the owners of the land and the only real governing body over it to date). If they let the railroad or the highway cross their lands, their claim will be almost worthless! So too will yours if you don't oppose the highway.

I also understand that the road presently being used was built and financed by the money saved by 10 or 15 of your band members. Then this strengthens your case even more. You built a road for your own purposes. You built a private road on private land, in effect; and now everybody is using it as if it were theirs — logging companies, the government, and the public. You need simply argue that it is time to remind everyone that they are trespassing...at your pleasure. But now that a major highway is planned, and because that highway (and the railway) will likely bring further developments to the area (industry and townsites), and because these new developments could be detrimental to the land (not to mention maybe to your people), you now feel it is time to reestablish the facts; the land is yours!

When you spoke on the telephone I got the impression that you are a man of deep compassion for your fellow man — no matter what race, creed or political persuasion. If I am correct in this regard, this then is to your people's benefit. But if I may take the liberty, Chief Williams, of sharing with you some of my own experience and understanding of my fellow "industrial" man, HIS WORD IS ONLY AS GOOD AS HIS SIGNATURE ON A LEGAL DOCUMENT — and sometimes the document is only as permanent as the paper it is written on. My people's word is seldom good. If there is money to be made by cheating or lying, most of my people will do so without a moment's hesitation. I hate to admit this, but it is so. (I think you are well aware of this, but better that I say it maybe?)

And I believe that the highway across your land is only the beginning: it is just the "thin edge of the wedge", with much more yet to come — only they aren't telling you about it yet. And if you let the highway through, how can you turn around and stop anything else? Possession can be nine tenths of the law — especially in a society where "might is often right".