

# B RIDGES AND B

## BARRICADES

### THE CROSSING OVER

An interview  
with Milton Born  
With A Tooth  
and Vickie English,  
Blackfoot  
Confederacy  
Lonfighters

*To protest the irrigation dam project on the Oldman River in Alberta, the Blackfoot Confederacy Lonfighter Society and its supporters sought to heal the river by diverting the water back into its original channel. Although this diversion took place on Peigan land, the Alberta government obtained a court order prohibiting any diversion of the river and sought to enforce it by entering Peigan territory, an act which contravenes Peigan sovereignty. On March 5th, 1991, Lonfighter leader Milton Born With A Tooth was convicted of seven of eight charges arising from his non-violent opposition to the construction of the Oldman Dam. Three weeks later, he was sentenced to 18 months in prison. In this interview, Milton Born With A Tooth and Vickie English discuss some of the issues surrounding this dam.*

**Border/Lines:** Everyone says the Oldman River dam is a disaster. Why do you think the Alberta government is persisting in going ahead with it?

**Milton Born With A Tooth:** The underlying reason is common knowledge to a lot of people. The basic reason is water transfer. Water transfer has a lot to do with the shortages they have in southern California, Arizona, Nevada and now Colorado as well. This is at the root of their reasoning. We do have information but, because of who controls what messages come out, it's hard to get through their reasons for justifying the building of the dam. It's basically the same thing as James Bay Hydro. It has the same people behind it and it has the same mentality. The reasoning the Canadian government is putting out to justify it doesn't say anything except that it's to help build the economy. But whose economy are we talking about? And at what price?

**Vickie English:** It is really a sad decision by both the federal and the provincial government because they have had a hidden agenda for a long time and have tried in many ways to take the reserves from Native people, so they can use the kinds of resources that we have on the reserves. They gave us the poorest land; a lot of the reserve land in Alberta is either on gravel pits or on prairie where nothing grows, or swamp or bush. But, all of a sudden, they are striking oil on most of these reserves and then there are such things as the water that is such a large commodity these days. Even in Turkey a large dam is being built – fresh water will be a means of control of the Middle East.

Now Native people are beginning to fight for their reserves, most of which are either in prime timber land or where there are good rivers. The government doesn't seem to care what's happening to these Native people. On the Peigan reserve, the Indian people who live along the river bottom have not been moved out. They have not been compensated but the non-Native people have been compensated. They have been moved out of the lower areas and they've been paid for their land. But the Native people have been given – the government said – four million dollars, most of which would go to management, overhead costs, lawyers, consultants. So by the time they have finished with all this financial expense they have nothing left for the people. The government doesn't seem to realize that the people are beginning to understand what's happening to them and the degree to which we, as Indian people, will fight against the government. The government will just make an example of what

their authority is, what their power is, and by making an example they will say if you protest against our development, our contracts, you will be in the same situation.

Though, their attempts to intimidate people are not working...

**Vickie English:** Their way of intimidating people is scary because it is not an Indian fight any more. It's a human rights issue. I think, in Alberta, it's a human rights issue rather than just a Native rights issue because they have taken away the freedom of speech, the right to be on your own property without having to fire warning shots. They just walk in whenever they want. The Native people were told not to do anything with the river and the RCMP were told the same thing, but the RCMP just walked in and they were not reprimanded. If the Indian people went near the water they would have been in jail. That kind of control from the government over the court system is a scary situation.

I'm interested in both the tensions and support from non-Native environmentalists. Are you getting much from them?

**Milton Born With A Tooth:** More so than people think. It's basically because if you look at Alberta, the environment is one that even rednecks, or what we refer to as a "hard-headed non-Native person," will have to admit that the scenery and the landscape is awesome. Even without a Native person saying too much about it they do admit that it is worth something other than destruction. On that level, we've been able to cross over a lot easier in getting the upper middle class support and getting the support of some of the more conservative environmentalists, the ones who hate to get their clothes dirty, who will do nice posters and nice banquets and stuff. But this is where we were able to cross over. This is where it came out how well we were able to unify these two, apartheid-like, situations. This has, in my view, saved some bloodshed, and saved myself from being incarcerated any longer. It has kept the issue to its original points, rather than making it a very one-sided, racist kind of struggle.

People are seeing that what we're talking about are the kinds of things that affect all of us, only that now they're understanding who can give the best interpretation of what the environment really means. In such a short length of time, the environmentalists in Alberta have had to cross over this line and come toward the aboriginal or Native side. Now they realize what all they've read in books or seen in movies, about us talking about nature, has given them - because now they are in

court battles and they realize that, in the courts, they have got to be able to have a better interpretation as to what the connection between the environment and humans is really all about. So, when this happens, we're going across the line.

Five years ago you could look back in Alberta and you could see this line, even the environmentalists were fighting against Natives because they said we shouldn't have any privileges or hunting rights, or special privileges for certain areas which we have access to on what they call crown land. They were saying that they had to treat everybody fair. Now they've changed their view and they're saying: maybe it's good that we have these ways to protect it, or that we've been giving it that fine line interpretation between nature and man or nature and human beings.

**Vickie English:** Getting across to the non-Indian people to support us in Alberta as a lobbying group is really difficult. There's so much education that has to be done. There's so much that they don't understand about Native people. Some of them have lived right next door to Native people all their lives but they see the Native people as separate from the environment. To try to make that connection, or to try to put into their minds that Native people don't have to learn to be environmentalists - they are environmentalists - is difficult. We are born into the kind of culture and lifestyle where we live the environment every day. We don't access it from books or learn about it in other ways then stand back and support it from a city where they say "well, the environment is out there and let's just leave it looking beautiful and once in a while we can go and look at it." The Native people live it day to day and it's really not a religion as much as it is a way of life and a culture. Something we live from day to day, meshed with the whole environment.

We are trying to keep the coalition that we started in Calgary going and to continue as a support group and a coalition to support Native rights because, at this point, people are beginning to understand that Native people don't want anything for nothing. They just want to live their life and they don't want to have people coming in and destroying their life because they know that, once the environment is destroyed, then their lifestyle is destroyed. To make non-Indian people understand that is a lot of hard work. A lot of meetings, a lot of groups being educated through speeches and talks, even writing - it's needed so much more now than ever before. Before, there wasn't really a need to educate the non-Indians as to what

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It is screaming  
and it is dying.  
Are you willing  
to listen?

Native people are. We didn't really need their support. We always wanted them to understand that we didn't have to have their support so desperately as we have to have it now.

I think it's much harder to access support in the West from non-Indians than it is in the East. It's very difficult to do anything that's a little bit out of the norm. You just have to keep plugging away. It's like digging at something that never comes to the bottom. But we are getting more support and it's coming from people who really understand. A lot of the support is from university professors, educated people. Not from the people who work on construction and don't know much about different cultures or who are not really sensitized to anything but their own work or their day-to-day as labourers.

Most of the people coming out to support the Native people are from civil liberties, people who work in universities, education systems and churches. The churches have been really supportive. They

have a group in the city which meets once a month to talk about Native issues. We talk about what kind of support we need and what kind of support we want, not what kind of support they think we should have.

I think a lot of people all over have the sense that, in terms of the land, it's now or never.

**Milton Born With A Tooth:** You can talk only so long and that's the problem – too many nice speeches, too many nice things. In a way what we did is we didn't just talk, we did. And that was the crossing over of everything. Everybody says, "when is somebody going to make the next step?" and "how many more times are we going to bring out the nice statistics?" For my part I don't care about all that, I don't have to ask permission because destruction is something that you have to act on. So you hurt people's feelings, but then the crossing over is how sincere you are about it.

It is what's going to be the teaching as to whether this is something that's worth looking into.

Just to point out how strong the line was that we crossed over, how many people would ever have thought that environmentalists would be cheering a bulldozer?

They were cheering a bulldozer on throughout the month of August as we were diverting the river into its original channel. Even that was something that was not very well reported and, if it had been reported, it would have made a lot more realize what we were able to do. To be a part of it and say, "well, maybe this is the answer, maybe this is a way not to have another Oka or another Lonefighters Society situation." We have all the things that can provide the answers and I think one of the greatest ones is that we've had enough of talk. We've had enough of it. Let's talk when we're doing, let's not talk when we're not doing.

**Vickie English:** This is a very dangerous tactic. It's very dangerous for the government to realize that the non-Indian people are beginning to see the Indian peoples' viewpoint.

The government does not want that. They have tried in so many different ways, by propoganda, by threatening, by just telling them outright "it's not your business, stay out of it." They'll try to quash the support that we have in whichever way they can. And, when they realize that a lot of the supporters are doing something about what's happening to the Native people and Native rights and the dam, they put a lot of people on it to distort what was being said. A lot of what was being said in the papers was really distorted and negative. None of the things they had done was in the paper, just what the Native people had done. They were referring to us

as militant and every other word was "militant Indians." They said that Indians were doing something to you white people so you had better stop and listen and realize it. And those who don't know what treaty rights are all about or what the environment is all about believe this kind of thing, so we lose their support.

How do you think we can best sustain the commitment?

**Milton Born With A Tooth:** You're talking to somebody who is, let's put it this way, front-line material. You're talking to somebody who says – well, my way of dealing with it is saying – "let's get in their face, let's stand in front of them, let's put away our differences." That's the only way I know how it works because I'm one who has looked at everything. They say shit kind of falls down, well, its always been falling down and I'm not the one who has a nice degree or a nice personal resumé and that's part of what I think people are hearing, at least at this day and time. They're hearing the front line people: their mentality, what makes them stand up, why do they do this. We do this because we have nothing left.

Do I tell all the people to give everything up and feel the same way we feel? Should we let these people just disappear? Does it take a death? That's what I'm looking at here, saying, well, maybe it does take a death, and for me I'm saying it's worth it. For me it's going to be the answer.

My adversaries out there are not planning to deal with me peacefully. They are planning to put me away. That's all there is to it, so what can we do? It's got to be immediate. It can't be at the next board meeting, it can't be at the next convention, it's got to be immediate. For my part, there's an enormous legal fee, there is enormous outreach work that has to be done, the message has to be carried out in a quality way, with people putting things in the right perspective. How do we break through to the other side? Well, we've shown how to break through to the other side, shown how to be effective in a very strategic way.

As for the Lonefighters, our approach starts with an idea of nature. When do we say that we can turn away? For myself, there's not a time or a second that I can turn away and accept building a dam. For me, I put all the energy to it and if it means dying, that's what it is because that's the seriousness of it. There's no nice thing that we can plan for next year. I don't know if I'm going to be here next year and that's reality because my adversaries out there are very serious. They have a billion-dollar mentality and, in order to face that, we're going to have to face it with the same kind of intensity and that's what's going to work. Lets put the foot down and let's start doing.

What makes me do what has happened in the last little while, I've done it because I've given everything away. That's what is real, is nature.

It's not something new, my people said that in 1866, a day before treaty signing. So it's not like all of a sudden. It's not a new thing. There are very few that remember, or there are very few that care. Everyone has gone through their assimilation process and, by going through that assimilation process, they've gone away from the real, true character, of being able to say: me and the water, we're friends. People can't understand it, yet it's true you have to have that kind of feeling for something to be able to say: well, let me stand in front of you, let me take all I can so that you can have that protection. If the water had a voice, it would say the same thing I said, I know that for sure, but it doesn't so the Creator said this is what we all must do. The Lonefighter Society, we ask for no permission, we have permission. Everyone has told me from the beginning, well, did you get permission from the elders, did you get permission from the chief of council? I get permission from no one, except from nature and that's the way I live it out. I don't need human permission, all I know is: nature is really – if you want to put words in its mouth – it's screaming. There's no other way to say it. It is screaming and it is dying. Are you willing to listen? I'm willing to listen, so now it's something that everyone's going to have to look at: if it's worth dying for. We're all going to die, let's set our priorities as to how we want our tombstone to read.

**Vickie English:** I think, now that a few uprisings have occurred across Canada, Natives are beginning to realize that they are the only ones who can do something about it. So many times the non-Indian people have made decisions for the Native people. Nowadays I think the Native people are becoming so aware of what is happening that they themselves are going to be their own support. You have to convince everyone not to be afraid. The Native people have to get closer together. They have to become unified. They have to understand that they need techniques and ways of understanding how the government works and how the system works in order to fight back. If they can fight back with the same tools and the same tactics they can come to a rising out of their oppression.

People just have to take the first step, and taking the first step for them is scary. We just have to have patience with them and help them to understand that taking the first step is really growth for their own rights and their own freedom. ♦