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## Always an Adventure: An Autobiography

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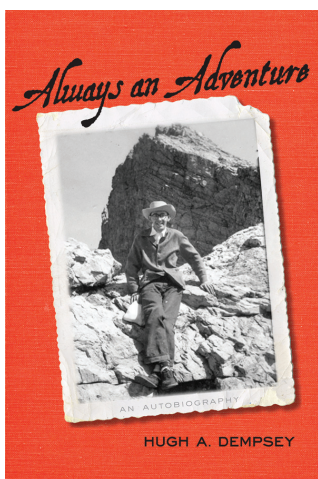
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## ALWAYS AN ADVENTURE: AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

by Hugh A. Dempsey  
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## *The Spirit Song*

When the announcement was made in 1983 that Calgary had been selected as the site for the 1988 Winter Olympics, Glenbow got busy to see what it could do and who it could find to pay for it. Julia Harrison suggested bringing together some of Canada's finest Native objects then in museums in Europe and the United States. The federal government gave us \$4,000 to study the feasibility of the project and when Julia returned from Europe she deemed it both desirable and possible. She estimated that some 300 to 500 pieces would need to be borrowed, two-thirds from Europe and one-third from the United States. The tentative name of the exhibition was "Forget Not My World," later changed to "The Spirit Sings." I was not directly involved in the day-to-day activities, as this was an exhibition program, but as a member of the Glenbow executive team I could not help but take part in the decision making. I also had my finger directly in the pie on a number of occasions.

The planning was going well until 1986. It was a massive task, involving negotiations with European and American museums, with External Affairs, and with possible sponsors. Julia took all these in hand, and soon Glenbow was engaged in planning, designing, and laying out the show. But hiding in the weeds was an unexpected factor, the Lubicon Indians. Let me say at the outset that I had no sympathy for the Lubicons or, more particularly, for their claims and methods. Here is the background to their problem as I saw it.

In 1899 the federal government made a treaty with the Indians of northern Alberta. The official party travelled along the Peace and Athabasca Rivers, expecting the Indians to come out from the hinterlands to accept the deal. Some of them, including those from the Lubicon Lake area, did, and were registered with the Whitefish Lake band. As time went along, more of them took treaty, and in 1908 a reserve was set aside at Whitefish Lake. In later years this reserve

was expanded to take into consideration additional people not included in the original land allocation.

In 1933, fourteen treaty Indians who were on the paysheets of the Whitefish Lake Reserve asked for a reserve at Lubicon Lake. In 1940 the government indicated that of those being paid at Lubicon Lake and Little Buffalo Lake, all but 8 of the 127 persons were members of the Whitefish Lake band. So, contrary to all later hoopla, these were not, as the Lubicons claimed, people who “never signed a treaty or ceded their rightful historic jurisdiction over their traditional territory”<sup>145</sup> Rather, they were Indians who had accepted treaty and were seeking a separate reserve.

At this point, the Department of Indian Affairs managed to mess everything up. Officials had no problem in allocating land to the group and in 1940 sent surveyors to lay out the reserve. However, they were unable to land because of a forest fire and they just didn’t come back. In 1949 the Alberta government did set aside some land for the federal government to use as a reserve, but the feds failed to respond and in 1954 the offer was withdrawn. It is too bad the way the Lubicons were mishandled by Indian Affairs, but it does not change the fact that they were treaty Indians, mostly registered at Whitefish Lake, who wanted their own reserve.

In 1979, Bernard Ominayak, chief of the Lubicons, hired Fred Lennarson to assist him in his efforts to get a reserve. The Chicago-trained political activist had previously worked for Harold Cardinal and there is no doubt he was a dynamic and aggressive fighter. Shortly afterwards the oil boom struck northern Alberta and the wilderness was filled with seismic crews and drilling rigs. The provincial government considered that Aboriginal rights had already been extinguished in the region and had no hesitation in issuing exploration and drilling permits. The Lubicons applied for an injunction to stop the work, but this was rejected by the Court of Queen’s Bench in 1983 and by the Alberta Court of Appeal. The Lubicons then appealed twice to the Supreme Court of Canada to review the case but in both instances it refused to hear their application.

There is no question that the band had run headlong into the gross inefficiency and mismanagement of the Department of Indian Affairs, which was a common situation for Indians all across Canada. Now the Alberta government was failing to provide land for a reserve and threw the area wide open for development. An appeal by the Lubicons to Alberta’s independent ombudsman found no evidence of cultural genocide, harassment, or trickery by either

the Alberta government or oil companies. Stupidity perhaps, callousness, most likely, and hardheartedness, most certainly.

The Lubicons shifted into high gear to pressure the government into making a settlement. Appeals were sent to church groups and others for support and the real issues became submerged in a flood of verbiage about exploitation, violation of human rights, implied starvation, destruction of culture, and many other claims that would tug at the heartstrings of impressionable people. The aim seemed to be to halt oil exploration and to gain recognition that the Lubicons still had Aboriginal rights for their whole hunting ground. The fact that they were simply treaty Indians seeking a new reserve seemed to be lost in the shuffle.

In 1984, the Alberta government confirmed that the majority of members of the Lubicon band could be traced to the Whitefish Lake and Wabasca reserves or had accepted half-breed scrip. There were less than a dozen who, although treaty Indians, were not attached to any other reserve. In spite of this, the Alberta government a year later offered to provide 25.4 square miles of provincial land to the Department of Indian Affairs for a Lubicon Reserve. This was based upon the band's population in 1940, when the reserve was first offered to them. The Lubicons refused the offer, demanding 80.2 square miles based on their current population. The government then upped its offer to 40 square miles and Ominayak came back with a demand for 91.4 square miles. Thus started a long and acrimonious dispute, involving not whether a reserve should be allocated, but how big it should be.

This was when Glenbow was unsuspectingly and innocently swept into the maelstrom of political infighting, bickering, and high-pressure publicity that marked the Lubicon issue. Early in 1986 the band announced plans for an international boycott of the Olympics, claiming it was sponsored by two of their adversaries – the Alberta government and the oil companies. A month later, when Shell Oil Canada gave Glenbow a grant of \$1.1 million to become the main sponsor of our show, the Lubicons shifted their focus. The combination of an oil company sponsor, a museum created through oil money, and an exhibition that dealt with Indians, was just too good to ignore.

Soon the Lubicons were turning out press releases calling for museums in Europe and North America to refuse to loan artifacts to the exhibition. They freely tossed around such expressions as “genocide” and accused those who organized the Olympics of being “actively seeking to destroy the Indian people.”<sup>146</sup> To accuse oil companies and governments of such deliberate actions was both irresponsible and unconscionable. Just three months earlier, the

federal government had given the Lubicons \$1.5 million as a show of goodwill to help them with their legal costs.

I don't know what the Lubicons expected would happen. Did they think Glenbow would intercede on their behalf with federal officials? Certainly one white Lubicon supporter said that the museum had to use its influence in Ottawa to resolve the band's claims. Influence in Ottawa? We didn't even have enough influence to get half the grants we were seeking. Obviously what the Lubicons really wanted was to bring worldwide attention to their plight, and they planned to use the boycott as a vehicle for international recognition. The fact that their actions could possibly ruin a Native-based exhibition seemed to be of no importance to them as they launched into their greater cause. This show was not only about Indians but also for Indians. As one official said, "the native peoples will benefit and our visitors from around the world will benefit from a greatly enhanced understanding of native people and their deeply rooted cultural traditions."<sup>147</sup>

However, the Lubicons in their campaign overlooked one factor – Duncan Cameron, our director. He had no intention of rolling over and playing dead for Fred Lennarson, Bernard Ominayak, or anyone else. As he said, "We think we're doing something that is very much in the interests of our native peoples, creating a heightened awareness of their rich cultural tradition."<sup>148</sup>

Duncan and Julia had a meeting with the Lubicons early on but they could not find any area for compromise. Besides letters being sent to major museums around the world, the Lubicons sought and received support from a number of Native political groups, such as the Assembly of First Nations, Indian Association of Alberta, and the Joint Council of Chiefs of Quebec. It has been a truism that when a situation occurs that pits Indian against non-Indian, other Native groups will support the Indians, right or wrong. Therefore, it was with some trepidation that I heard the Lubicons were seeking support from the Blood, Blackfoot, and other southern Alberta tribes. I must say I was pleasantly surprised when initially the Sarcees, Stoneys, and Blackfoot refused to join the boycott while the Bloods sat on the fence, taking the side of neither. As one chief said, "Calgary has always treated its Indian people fairly, and almost always included us in things that were happening, and so we want to help Calgary and Canada make the Olympics a success."<sup>149</sup>

To combat the European letter-writing campaign against the exhibition, Canadian embassies contacted museums and provided them with details about the dispute that had not been mentioned in the welter of press releases and "informational" letters from the Lubicons. However, in the first onslaught of

publicity, some museums did withdraw from the exhibition. One claimed it was afraid that the exhibition would be bombed or the artifacts damaged by Lubicon supporters. Others felt sympathy for the Lubicons and either did not want to become involved or wanted to show their support.

As matters progressed, or regressed, the Lubicon attacks became personal and vicious. At one stage Lubicon leaders wrote to a European museum that “The people ... at Glenbow are our mortal enemies, the murders [*sic*] of our children.”<sup>150</sup> He also said that Duncan was “a hypocrite more concerned with saving artifacts than human lives.”<sup>151</sup> I remember wondering: where does Duncan have a choice between saving artifacts and saving lives? Also, the fact that the Lubicon population was increasing (according to their compensation demands) instead of decreasing, gave the lie to the whole statement. Other releases attacked Glenbow because it had been started with oil money and the show was being funded by Shell, seemingly implying it was in league with the oil companies to destroy the Lubicons. Such comments really bothered me, as they defied all sense of logic.

By the summer of 1987 we were seeing the results of the boycott. A number of museums had originally agreed to lend objects to us, but with the Lubicon tirade a few had withdrawn and others were considering it. One of the major losses occurred when James Smith, curator of the Museum of the American Indian in New York, managed to get his board to change its mind and withdraw. Others that bailed out were the Peabody Museum, National Museum of Denmark, Ethnographic Museum of Norway, and the Musée d’Histoire in Switzerland. But Duncan fought back. When Bruce Trigger, the honorary curator at McCord Museum in Montreal, tried to get the institution to back out of its loan, Duncan went directly to the governing Board, who honoured their previous commitment. The curator resigned. Similarly, when Bill Sturtevant, a friend of mine at the Smithsonian Institution, tried to pull his institution out, Duncan went to their Secretary and got the loan confirmed. But there is no doubt we were worried. If other museums followed the half dozen or so that supported the boycott, our exhibition could become seriously compromised. Duncan worked very hard to see that this did not happen.

About this time, I wrote to my friend Jack Ewers, in Washington, “Our native exhibition is still running up against a well engineered boycott by a group of Indians and their advisers who are trying to wrest a \$1 billion land settlement deal from the Canadian government. We are the innocents caught in the middle. It has certainly added to Glenbow’s work load.”<sup>152</sup>

I added my own contribution to the fray when I prepared a three-page “Selected Chronology of Events Relating to Lubicon Land Claims and Boycott.” The account began in 1899 with the signing of Treaty Eight, then followed with the promise of a reserve to the treaty Indians, the government screw-ups, and then the court-related incidents after the discovery of oil in the area. Finally, it explained Glenbow’s role in the 1988 Olympics, quoting a Native newspaper that complained the exhibition was “being used as a pawn in the game of selfish politics.” This chronology was sent to all the museums that had been approached by Glenbow to make the loans. A Lubicon supporter reacted by saying it was “wildly inaccurate and deliberately misleading.”<sup>153</sup> The only specific point he challenged was the failure to mention the Fulton report which, in fact, actually was in my chronology.

By autumn of 1987 the tide had changed in favour of Glenbow. Duncan’s tireless efforts to keep European museums on side was succeeding as boards decided to keep out of the Lubicon political dispute. At the end of the year I wrote to Ewers that “A number of people worked very hard to try to get museums not to loan to us.” These included leading figures from the Heye Foundation of New York and Bill Sturtevant at the Smithsonian of Washington. The Lubicon group started off by writing to museums all over the world and to pressure them not to loan. “Fortunately,” I added, “they had no idea who we were borrowing from and, in the end, their effort failed. I think there were eleven museums which would not loan, but more than sixty did. As a result, we have had a minor inconvenience but no major setback.”



When opening day arrived, *The Spirit Sings* was a joy to behold. Of the 665 artifacts, many were world famous and had appeared in coffee table books and art publications. To actually see these items was quite a thrill. I had arranged for my old friend Jim Many Bears to give the opening prayer and showed him around the exhibition before it opened. He was very impressed, and was even more impressed when I presented him with a l’Assomption sash that I had picked up in an antique shop during my travels.

The boycott was a total failure. Within a short time we had more than 85,000 visitors and the remarks were very flattering. In the end, the attempted boycott had only increased public interest in the show. Someone commented that the dispute involving Glenbow and the Lubicons could have only one result – one would be a complete winner and the other a complete loser. That’s



what happened. And now, these many years later, the Lubicons still have not settled their case.

One thing that the boycott did achieve was to raise the awareness that Native people should be involved in the preparation of such shows, even if they dealt with a time period far earlier than any local experience. There were enough questions raised about *The Spirit Sings* to bring about a change and to have Native participation for any such future exhibits. Julia Harrison was particularly adamant on that point.

As part of the celebrations, Glenbow designed an Olympic pin that used *The Spirit Sings* logo as its main feature. These were given out to special guests. Also, just about every business or group involved in the Olympics had its own pin. In the mall just outside Glenbow the Coca-Cola company erected a large tent to promote its own pins and to have what it called a pin trading centre.

As the Olympics progressed, we were bombarded by people who wanted our pins, many wanting to trade those from their own companies. That's when I got the idea that Glenbow should collect as many pins as possible as an historical record of the event. One of our staff, David Spindel, was an inveterate collector, so he jumped at the chance when we offered to give him a supply of pins and send him out to the mall to start trading. Glenbow's pins were rare and special, so Dave didn't just trade one for one. He wheeled and dealt, sometimes getting three or four pins for one of ours. At the same time, I sent letters to just about every firm that had a pin, and even to the company that manufactured them, seeking pins for our collection. As an added feature, I wrote to the Olympic committees of participating countries.

As the collection piled up, Ron Getty and I decided to put them on display in the lobby. We rounded up some old cases, and Ron organized the pins in a way that would appeal to collectors. In no time flat, hundreds of pin collectors were storming our lobby, finding out what they were missing and looking for people to trade with. Many of the Olympic countries were generous in donating their pins, and in some cases copies of their medals, so people came to look at items that could be seen nowhere else in Calgary. By the time it was over, some 46,000 people had come to Glenbow just to see the pins. After it was over, the cases were dismantled and the pins placed in our collections.

