

## A Fleeting Account of some of the Life and Times of Cy Standing

By Ron Merasty

### Early Days

Cyrus Merrill Standing has been the architect of his destiny seemingly since he arrived on March 10, 1937. He was born at Wahpeton Dakota Nation, then perhaps numbering 60-70 members, and was one of five to be born to Tom and Mary (nee Goodshield) Standing.

A couple of decades prior to his birth, there had been so many more Dakota in the Prince Albert area. His grandmother had told him that she had grown up at their camp situated close to what would later become the Saskatchewan Penitentiary just west of the city. (When Saskatchewan became a province the City of Prince Albert famously chose the penitentiary rather than the university when Saskatchewan, and so became, in the immortal words of Lawrence Joseph, "Jail City.")

Another group had their encampment at what would become the present-day Cooke golf course now within city limits. A third "tribe" lived in the area of present-day Wahpeton Dakota Reserve 94B, Standing refers to them as a "tribe because Dakota has 7 different dialects and each camp spoke their own.

In 1918-1919, just after the First World War ended, Spanish influenza killed off almost everyone at 94B except for one family. In time everyone was relocated to the present reserve located about 15 kilometres northwest of the city.

When Standing's grandmother was growing up at the aforementioned 'Round Plain,' as it translates from Dakota, she had attended a one-room schoolhouse. When WDN members relocated it was taken down (however humble it was) and then reassembled at their present-day reserve. That was where Standing attended school for a time.

When he was four he remembers that his mother was taken away to the sanitarium because she had contracted tuberculosis. She passed away when he was about seven years old.

Shortly after that, in the 1944-45 academic year Standing was sent to residential school that was then located near Prince Albert Collegiate Institute. He hated residential school and since home was relatively close by he kept "escaping." He would usually stay home for a week because his grandmother didn't mind him being around. Then his father would take him back only to have him escape, again and again.

"Eventually, they didn't bother with me," he said – in a decidedly unglum tone of voice – of the residential school authorities. He continued his schooling at the reserve schoolhouse which went up to Grade 8. After that, when he was a bit older, he went back to residential school where he boarded and attended PACI.

He left school after completing Grade 11. In those last three years he had been in air cadets. Originally, he and other First Nation cadets had been with 38 Squadron at the Armoury but later formed their own 590 Squadron.

### Air Force Days

At age 18, in 1955, Standing joined the Royal Canadian Air Force, taking his basic training at 8 Wing Trenton (Ontario). An

aptitude test indicated that he was a good candidate for electronics or mechanical training. Saying that there was a need at the time for people with electronics knowhow, he was sent to an air force communications school at Clinton, about 40 miles north of London, Ontario, which is located somewhat close to Lake Huron. That consumed about a year. Twenty-four had started the course and eighteen earned their certificates with Standing finishing third in his class.

He said it had been a challenging program with "most of it (being) mathematics and physics, formulas with electronics, circuits, schematics."

Because he had finished top three in the program he had first crack at a posting of his choice. He could have taken one in Saskatoon, closer to home, but he remembered his father's advice that an opportunity to travel and to go overseas would probably be as valuable as attending an institution of higher learning. So he chose a posting in France.

In 1956 the RCAF replaced some of its F-86 Sabre jets with the CF-100, and because Standing had requested a posting in France, he ended up at RCAF Station Grostenquin, 2 (Fighter) Wing, near Saint-Avold, about 15 miles from the West German border. The nearest metropolitan centre was Strasbourg. His regular duties as a Communications Technician, Air, had him trained to repair and maintain the CF-100's radio and navigation equipment.

This was during the Cold War and every second week he had to stay all week on standby at the airbase. On the second week they would be given four days off and he and his comrades would take a train to perhaps Luxembourg, Holland, or Germany for rest and relaxation. Later on some of his friends bought automobiles. When driving in Germany in mid-September an Ocktoberfest tent looming into sight would mean they would be stuck there for a couple or three days.

He was overseas for two years and was also posted at Zweibrucken and Baden-Soellingen in West Germany. The latter was in the Black Forest, not far from Strasbourg which almost touches the border with Germany.

### Repatriation Days

When Standing returned to Canada he was based out of Trenton and North Bay for about three or four years, which he considered a good experience. He enjoyed the area lakes and learned to play golf. He spent the last three years of his time with the RCAF at 15 Wing, Moose Jaw.



Ron Merasty Photo

Cy Standing is a proud member of the Saskatchewan First Nations Veterans Association. This photo is from 2010.

In 1965 and now discharged from the Air Force, Standing applied for a job as a Natural Resources radio technician. At the time Norcanair had just purchased Saskatchewan Government Airways and they needed a radio technician and so got that job thanks to his state-of-the-art knowledge. He established a shop at the Prince Albert Airport after ordering new equipment.

By then he and the former Lorraine Standing ready from White Bear First Nation were married. They had known each other during residential school days, had stayed in touch, and were married in 1963 after living together for a time. They had three children together, Linda, Lois and Curtis.

As a radio technician with Norcanair

Standing was regularly flown out to bases at Uranium City, Wollaston, Stony Rapids and La Ronge to repair radios.

He recalled that on one of those remote location trips he was working on a plane, as he said, "tearing it apart to get at the radio," when some white guy showed up and declared, "What is this Indian doing here?" Standing laughed at the memory.

He said some fellow employees were also resentful at the size of his paycheque but he had had the training and had to be paid "top dollar."

To paraphrase Charles Dickens 'they probably thought that as a matter of principle the Dakota ought to have been dressed in rags and not smiling at them on payday with a bulging wallet.'

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Deschambault Grad – It is June 1 at Kimosom Pwatinahk Collegiate in Deschambault Lake as the Grade 12 grads, their escorts and even a couple of their children are waiting in the Library for the start of graduation exercises.

Ron Merasty Photo

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At this time when he and his family were living at a house on 14th Street West and 17th Avenue in Prince Albert, he was recruited by Malcolm Norris, executive director of the Friendship Centre, to join the board. When Norris left, Standing became the executive director, yes, at a lower wage than what he had had at Norcanair but he agreed to a moonlighting agreement with his former employer doing essentially the same duties. That way, he was able to maintain about the same level of compensation as formerly.

When he had returned to Prince Albert in 1965 Standing had begun taking part in the political life at WDN and was considered a great resource by Elders because of his ability to speak two languages and for his worldly knowledge. He became a spokesperson, and in time, a councillor and would attend Federation of Saskatchewan Indians (FSI) meetings which were often held at Fort Qu'Appelle. He may have been pleasantly surprised to find that many of the councillors of other First Nations were former classmates from residential school days.

Living in Prince Albert the couple made friends with other "urban Indians," and one of them was Sol Sanderson, who is a few years younger than he is. "And then we got political," he says.

### Political Days

In 1969 Standing was elected to an FSI executive position. At that time the FSI governance structure had a chief, vice-chief, treasurer, and a secretary, which he initially was. He was elected as an FSI executive member on and off for about 14 years, last in about 1983. He was also elected chief of WDN for nine-ten years straight beginning around the same time. Then he got defeated, he says, only to have WDN Elders come to him asking him to run again. Altogether he was chief for about 22-23 years in non-consecutive terms.

He says that in those early years as chief WDN received very little Indian Affairs funding and having a small population the demands of chief were not so great and so could also handle FSIN executive responsibilities. "You couldn't do that now," he says.

In spring 1969 the Pierre Trudeau Liberal government announced a White Paper to eliminate Indian status. In the fall he remembers that FSI was organizing meetings to fight the proposed policy change.

"That was a real big shock, and a good waking-up process," he says about the uproar caused by the White Paper, "because, I think, when Trudeau came in, of course, he didn't care about First Nations people," Standing says. "He only thought about French rights.... You know, the termination policy always existed in the U.S. The U.S. termination policy was always there, way back, and then, of course, in Canada, the assimilation policy - same thing.

"So, the White Paper just kind of formalized it - formalized the termination policy, or the assimilation policy (to get rid of Indian status) and then transfer services from the federal government to the provincial government," he said. "So the White Paper spelled that out, and that's when Indians across the country rebelled, and I just happened to be elected to the executive then."

"To me it was a good educational experience because the Elders taught us about treaty rights, and the British Columbia Indians talked about aboriginal title and aboriginal rights."

Wahpeton Dakota Nation, like four Manitoba Dakota Nations, and three others in Saskatchewan he says, are non-treaty. "We never signed treaties," which he says were of the "land cession" type in reference to the Numbered Treaties.

"We would prefer to eventually sign a modern-day treaty," he says, and that talks are ongoing. "The Dakota, we still have aboriginal title because we never signed any land cession treaties," he added.

### Latter Days

As the new millennium approached in 1999, Standing was appointed to the National Parole Board by the Chretien government upon a recommendation by Saskatchewan MP, Ralph Goodale. He was on that board for a total of about eight years. Around the time his last term was ending he discovered that he was diabetic.

He says that diabetes, and even asthma, can be controlled by regular exercise and a good mental attitude, and so he began walking regularly ("as much as I can") and playing golf, which he does to this day. He may ride the golf cart a little more now but he still has to walk to play his shots and when looking for lost balls.

When he was still WDN chief around 2007 "we separated business and politics," he says, noting then that First Nations that have successful business enterprises had done that, like the famous Chief Clarence Louie's Osoyoos Indian Band in British Columbia and Lac La Ronge Indian Band closer to home.

When Standing lost his last election run for chief in recent years he got appointed to WDN's economic development board as a community member by Chief Leo Omani, and then the board elected him as chairman. "I'm still chairman of our development corporation," he says. He says they are looking for partnerships, have never had much capital, but are looking optimistically ahead.

Standing was on the board of directors of Wanuskewin Heritage Park for about 10 years. When his term expired four years ago, he felt that he should allot more time to himself and did not wish to continue serving.

Six years ago he had started his involvement with Affinity Credit Union. Affinity's by-laws, he says, allowed for the creation of a First Nations 'district' in the province and about eight First Nations, including Beardy's and Okemasis, Cowessess, WDN and some from the Battlefords, formed one, even if they are widely separated geographically. They even opened a credit union branch at Cowessess, and two district members, Standing, and Paul Ledoux from Muskeg Lake First Nation, were elected to the board. Standing was on the board for six years and counted the time spent there as "a good experience." He only resigned from that board in the first full week of June, but it is likely only a coincidence that it was golf season.

When Standing was on the parole board he had heard then that some people spent their winters in Arizona and thought he might like to try that, musing, 'when I retire.' About six years ago he went there for his first winter, spending only six weeks there. Then in Year Two he spent two-and-a-half months. Now he usually goes after the New Year and stays three months. "It's good and healthy and I walk the trails

every day, or golf," he says, despite a wonky shoulder.

Standing is still on WDN's economic development, health, education and specific claims committees. Of the latter, he says that in 1894 the band lost three sections of land. Specific claims often take years to resolve but says they are getting closer to a final settlement and that final sum will also include additional compensation for the loss of use of that land for about the past 125 years. He is also an advisor to the council on their comprehensive land claim since they still retain their aboriginal title to land, which is, definitely, significant.

In March 2017 Standing celebrated his 80th birthday at least three times: in Las Vegas, when his partner, Ava Hill, flew down; in Saskatoon, in a come-and-go organized by his children Lois and Curtis; and another organized by Ava at Six Nations, Ontario, where she is from. They have known each other for 30 years and partners for the last 26. They are not married but he jokes about the prospect of matrimony "spoiling a good thing."

Cy Standing may be spending winters in Arizona but he doesn't appear to be retired.



Ron Merasty Photo  
Ross Custer of Pelican Narrows with his stepdaughter, Emery Dorion. Both were attending urban treaty day in Prince Albert on June 15, 2017.

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