



Elders Chair: H. Tom White Recalls Stories From His Younger Days As Told To Him By Anishinaabe Elders

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Interview and photograph by Patsy Gordon

“**B**iin-Da-Gay” he yelled as I knocked on his door. Howard Thomas White is better known as “H. Tom” or just “Tom” or “Uncle Tom” to his nephews and nieces. He is a brother to my mother, and is the only living member left of my mother’s family.

I yelled back to him that the door was locked so he wheeled himself to the door in his wheel chair and unlocked it and let me in. I made myself at home and set the table for us so we could sit down and enjoy the lunch that I had brought over for him and I. His son, Russell, just happened to be there and so I invited him to join us for lunch.

“What clan do we belong to?” Uncle Tom asked me. I said, “I think my mother always told me we belonged to the fish clan.” He said, “Yea, I think that’s right, the bullhead clan, that’s what my Dad told me too.”

H. Tom is 69 years old and was born the youngest of 10 children to John White and Lilly West White on December 28, 1934 in Onigum, Minnesota. In earlier years, Onigum had a hospital. Tom had 4 brothers and 6 sisters. Two of his brothers died young in their early 20’s, as a result of tuberculosis. His mother, Lilly, believed it was injuries that both of her boys had sustained that led to their tuberculosis and subsequently, their deaths. Tom told the story of how his brother had jumped a freight in the rain trying to come home from school in Flandreau. He grabbed hold of a latch on the train and lost his grip and fell hard on his chest. The fall knocked him out. No one ever knew how long Fred laid in the rain

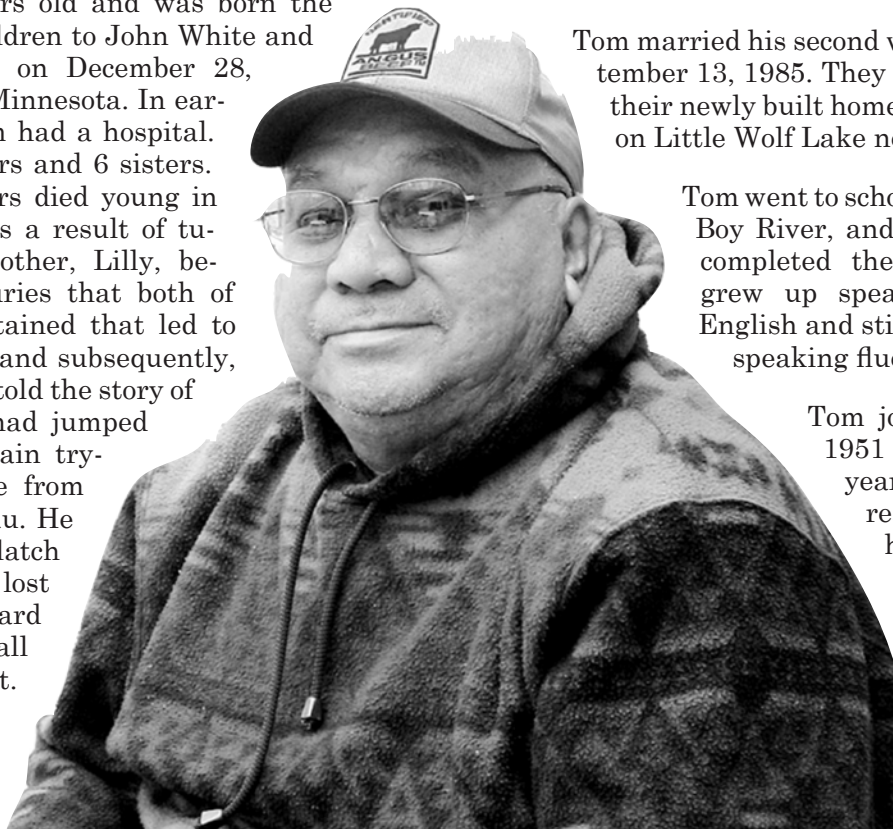
before he regained consciousness. (I remember my mother telling me this story about her brother Fred, too.) Tom also said that his mother believed another one of her son’s illness was also caused by an injury he received from jumping off from their barn. His mother never lived to know many of her grandchildren. She also died a young death due to complications of diabetes.

Tom and his first wife, Clarice, had 6 children together, 4 boys and 2 girls. They lost their youngest son, Ralph, to cancer in January of 1996. They lived in Minneapolis from 1959 to 1974 in the beginning of their marriage and raised their kids there. Tom and Clarice’s children have blessed them with 8 grandsons and 1 granddaughter. Six of those grandchildren (5 boys and 1 girl) are the children of their son, Russell. They also have 2 great grand daughters, and he also has 2 great step grandsons. Tom and Clarice later divorced.

Tom married his second wife, Joyce, on September 13, 1985. They currently reside in their newly built home out in the country on Little Wolf Lake near Cass Lake.

Tom went to school in Federal Dam, Boy River, and Walker where he completed the 9th grade. Tom grew up speaking Ojibwe and English and still has the ability of speaking fluent Ojibwe today.

Tom joined the Navy in 1951 and served two years during the Korean War, and was honorably discharged in 1953. He did his basic training in the Great Lakes in Michigan. He



served as a deck hand and a cook aboard a destroyer escort ship named the "U.S.S. Courier 700". During that time, he said, "I seen action in Korea, they were shooting at us!" Tom's son, Russell, piped in and said, "Hey Dad, what about that time you joined the Army?" Tom said, "Oh yea, I was in the Army too." He proceeded to tell me about the time he joined the Army at the age of 14. I asked, "How in the world did you get into the Army at 14 years old?" He said, "I was a big dude, man!" He got through basic training in Fort Riley, Kansas before they found out his real age. Four months later, he said he was signing up to become a paratrooper and there was some papers he needed to fill out regarding insurance and that's when the truth came out.

In the 1960's, he went to cooking school in Minneapolis. While living in Minneapolis he also was involved with the Upward Bound program, where he was able to attend school part time and work part time. He worked for the Minneapolis Public School Systems in the late 60's as a liaison between the school system and the Indian Student Aid Program. In 1977, he obtained his general education degree (GED), and went on to graduate from Bemidji State University with a major in Indian Studies in 1986 at the age of 52 years old. He minored in chemical dependency. He said his mother always told him, "You have to get an education, Tom!" But Tom admits alcoholism held him back in his younger years. He started a sober lifestyle in 1975 and has kept his sobriety ever since. His main goal in life was to get that college degree, and he did succeed. Although he said, "I was a late bloomer."

John White, Tom's father, told him many stories about "The Battle of Sugar Point" that he was told by his father, Tom's grandfather. Tom called his grandparents "Grandpa Waubojeeg" and "Grandma Maneengwam". During the battle, the women and children of Sugar Point, would have to keep running further back into the forest to stay away from the battle that was actively taking place between the white men and the natives. Tom's father, John, was a baby at the time. As they ran deeper into the forest, Grandma Maneengwam hid John in the bushes somewhere along the way to try and keep him from being found. Tom said laughing, "I don't know why they didn't take him along!"

Tom told me the story about "Gewezeance", whom

he said was an old time Chief on the Leech Lake Reservation. He had long red braids and lived on a farm. He was well known for wanting to keep the reservation as a closed reservation, which meant he didn't want to sign over anything to the U.S.



Government which would mean the Reservation losing control over their land, etc.

The Marshals who were "Wi-sok-goo-day-we-na-nee-wug" (half breeds) wanted to assassinate Gewezance because of this and hired full breeds to kill him, and they told the full breeds that they would pay them once they succeeded at killing him. During the ensuing gun fight and before he died, Gewezance shot and killed one of them. Shots fired from one of the Marshals rifles killed Gewezance. Tom said, "It took 5 or 6 shots to kill him." After the assassination, when the full breeds went to collect their bounty for killing Gewezance, the Wi-sok-goo-day-we-na-nee-wug went back on their word and told the full breeds that they didn't know them or what they were talking about.

Tom talked about how the BIA changed the name Waubojeeg to White. He believes it was during this battle that the name change took place.

The Wi-sok-goo-day-we-na-nee-wug also captured Bug-O-Nay-Ge-Shig (means hole in the day) and held him prisoner for bringing alcohol on to the reservation. Tom's elders told him that Bug-O-Nay-Ge-Shig never bothered anyone, he always stayed in his teepee. When they caught Bug-O-Nay-Ge-Shig, they were taking him to jail in Walker by boat. They landed on shore somewhere neat the Stony Point Village. As they were ushering him through the Village, he told the Indian women and children there that were watching all this happen, "Help me, I didn't do anything and I don't know why these guys are taking me to jail!" The We-sok-goo-day-we-na-nee-wug were intent on making a name for themselves and wanted the prestige of being the ones to capture him. After hearing Bug-O-Nay-Ge-Shig proclaim his innocence, the Indian women attacked the soldiers and gave Bug-O-Nay-Ge-Shig the chance to escape. I think the legend today is that Bug-O-Nay-Ge-Shig was a chief of the Tribe. Tom's grandparents and other elders told his father that Bug-O-Nay-Ge-Shig never was a Chief.

After he finished telling me about the legends of the Battle of Sugar Point as he heard them, he then told

me about his life as a boy growing up. The thing that had the most impact on Tom was his mother's death. Lilly West White was a hard working, very caring and loving mother who took very good care of her children. Tom was only 12 or 13 years old when his mother died. He recalled times of the family doing things together such as picking blueberries and ricing, setting net to catch whitefish, and tapping maple trees to make syrup to either sell to add to the family finances or to keep as a part of their food to eat. Many times the families would get together and all ride out together to a blueberry patch or a lake where they would be ricing at, and set up a tent to camp until they were finished with their work. Tom said, "We had a big old canvas tent." Just from his family alone, seven of them would make these trips to get the berries or to harvest the wild rice.

Many of us remember Tom today for his "love of the game". Coaching and playing softball from as far back as the 1960's has always been a big part of Tom's life. He coached in Minneapolis in the 1960's through the 80's. There was even a short span during that time when he played softball and coached Anishinabe basketball in San Francisco, California. He started the first Anishinabe softball teams in Minneapolis and also started the first Anishinabe teams (women's and men's) on the Bemidji League. Until recently, Tom coached Indian women's softball leagues for many years, taking them to tournaments being played as far away as Idaho. When Tom first moved his family back to the Reservation from Minneapolis in 1974, they lived in the first house in what everybody knows today as the "Plantation", and the many deer were free to roam. Tom said, "We ruined them guys hunting." Today there are many houses there. It was in these years when Tom started caring for his elderly father. Tom continued to care for his father until the time of his father's death in the late 1980's.

Tom was diagnosed with diabetes in the middle 1960's. After battling the disease for many years, his kidney failed, which meant he would have to start kidney dialysis. Rather than choosing hemodialysis where you go three times a week to have the dialysis procedure done for you, Tom chose to do home dialysis (peritoneal) where he could do the procedure himself on a nightly basis. Tom says "I recommend all people to be on home dialysis, it's easier on the

system!"

In September of 2002, Tom got the call he had always been waiting for since he heard the news that his kidneys were starting to fail that subsequently led to the dialysis. Tom said taking a kidney from one of his children was not an option, he didn't want to take away from them what they might need themselves one day. The hospital in Minneapolis had found a kidney match for him and needed him to report to them immediately! Tom was nowhere to be found. I asked him, "Where were you?" He said "I was taking my lunch break and resting over in the park. I didn't have my cell phone with me because I was recharging the batteries in my office." When he returned to his office after his lunch break, the secretaries were hollering out the window for him to "Hurry, the doctors called from Minneapolis and they've got a kidney for you!" When Tom called his doctor, he asked him, "Can you be here by 5:00?" Tom was not able to get there until the next day, but the kidney transplant took place as soon as he did get there and Tom says, "Everything is working real good."

Unfortunately, sometime in late October 2003 Tom had a sore on his toe that became infected because of the diabetes, which led to three amputations on the same leg for him. They first tried to stop the spread of gangrene by removing the toe which didn't work. Within a couple of days, they had to remove the foot at the ankle. When this still didn't stop the spread, on November 3rd, 2003, they removed Tom's leg just below the knee. He is currently involved with rehab at the Cass Lake PHS, with the prospect of soon receiving a prosthesis which will enable him to walk again.

Tom says his wife, Joyce, has helped him through all this, and he appreciates and loves her for it! Joyce works part time as a licensed nutritionist, and spends the afternoons and evenings at home with her husband, where she is able to assist him with his needs.

Tom says "Gii-Zhe-Moni-Doo" his spiritual faith in God and his son Jesus Christ has everything do with his well-being of today. ■

