

BIA Papers Bare Indian Neglect

By Jack Anderson

In all the hoopla about the million-dollar sacking of the Bureau of Indian Affairs building last month, the Indians' legitimate cries for help have been largely drowned out.

The Broken Treaties Papers, taken by the ton from the building and made available to us by the Indians, tell of land deals, water grabs and appalling neglect by the federal government.

But the small stories found in the documents are often more poignant than the big scandals. Document after document touches on the same theme: the daily struggle by the Indians for dignity, for equal treatment as Americans.

There's a confidential murder report, for example, from BIA investigator Peter Three Stars. It is written in staid, police-blotter language, but near the end, the emotion finally breaks through.

Tersely, Peter Three Stars describes the brutal murder of two old Indian women last June on the Wisconsin reservation of the Lac du Flambeau Chippewas. "On June 13, two elderly local tribal members were severely beaten," begins the report. "One died almost instantly, and the other remained alive for five days."

When white women are murdered in Wisconsin, the police respond swiftly. But the savage beating of two Indian women, apparently, was considered less urgent.

Reports Peter Three Stars: "The State Crime Laboratory was called the morning of the murders. They finally showed up around 4 p.m. and stayed around for an hour."

Weeks later, the tribe still had heard nothing from the state lab. "The sheriff's office told the tribal chairman at one point to quit calling them regarding the murders," recounts Peter Three Stars.

Appeal to FBI

The FBI often investigates Indians who commit crimes, so the tribal leaders thought the FBI might be willing to investigate a crime against the Indians.

"On July 7," relates Peter Three Stars, "the Tribal Council appealed to the FBI to intervene as they felt the state and local enforcement officials were not doing anything to solve the murders."

"By letter of July 19, the acting director of the FBI, Mr. Gray, advised the Council he did not have any jurisdiction in Lac du Flambeau" and told the Indians to try the state government.

The Tribal Council then turned to Wisconsin's Gov.

Patrick Lucey and Attorney General Robert Warren, begging them to investigate the murders so that "justice may prevail." The governor sent back a perfunctory response, expressing "hope" Warren would do something. Warren simply ignored the appeal.

The tribal leaders, meanwhile, developed their own leads and tried to press them on the local sheriff. On Aug. 9, according to Peter Three Stars, they "accosted Sheriff John Scott . . . They advised Sheriff Scott they had information and possible leads."

The sheriff promised to send divers to search a nearby lake for clues "the next day." It was several days later, of course, before the divers showed up.

At this point in his report, Peter Three Stars, an Oglala Sioux, can no longer contain his outrage. Suddenly, an agitated appeal disrupts his flat factual prose.

"What else can the tribe do to get action toward resolving the two murders? ! ! !" he pleads. "Until overt action is taken to crack this case, the local people, both tribal and non-tribal, will continue to live in constant fear of being the next victims."

Footnote: To bring the case up to date, my associate Les Whitten contacted Tribal

Chairman William Wildecat at his Chippewa headquarters. "Finally, the state came down, and we gave them our clues, and they have a suspect," he said. "We got almost no help from the local people. It took us four months to get the wheels moving."

Letter from Shipboard

Ten seamen from the Navy cargo ship Francis Marion sent a signed complaint to Navy chief Adm. Elmo Zumwalt.

"We feel it's about time someone wrote about the conditions and harassment on board," they wrote. They griped about little things like haircut standards. "You almost have to go bald," they complained.

But what was "really bothering the crew," they said, was the condition of the ship. They cited such failings as generators that don't load properly, noisy reduction gears, metal slivers in the oil strainers, faulty evaporators and bad pumps. The ship was unfit to leave the pier, they said.

Not until we heard about it and began asking questions, however, did the Navy belatedly respond. Next day, a long letter was rushed off to the seamen conceding much of their criticism was justified.