

**TALKING
TO THE
STORY KEEPERS**

TALES FROM THE CHILCOTIN PLATEAU

SAGE BIRCHWATER

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Willie Sulin, the son of T̓silhqot'in father Frank Sulin and Dakelh mother Ellie Stillas Sulin, was the second husband of Lucy Dagg Dester Sulin. Willie and Lucy made their home at Towdystan. Sage Birchwater photo

THUNDER BERT AND THE TROOPERS OF WILLIAMS LAKE

At the end of December 1975 I was clumping through the snow to my office in the Cariboo Friendship Centre when I came upon Thunder Bert Johnson trying to get into the building. Normally the facility was open, with its perpetual pot of coffee and soft sofas offering respite from the cold, but this day it was closed over the Christmas break. It was nearly -20°C , and Bert was cold and hungry.

Bert and his wife, Adele, were members of the Trooper community that frequented the streets of Williams Lake in those days and were regulars at the Friendship Centre. They lived in a derelict house known as the Troopers' Shack on a parcel of T'exelc First Nation (Sugar Cane) land within the city boundaries near Scout Island at the west end of Williams Lake. The property fronted on an extensive marsh at the outflow of the lake, and the house was owned by Sonny Gilbert, a member of T'exelc First Nation. Sonny shared his domain with up to a dozen other Indigenous people from various communities across the region.

How the Troopers got their name isn't exactly clear. There's some debate about it. Some say it was because of the way they moved about the city in group formation, following a wine jug down the alleys. Others say it had more to do with their cohesive identity, camaraderie and tendency to look out for one another like soldiers in a battalion. At any rate, it was an identity they readily embraced. They were defiant, perhaps, at being outcasts, but self-possessed with a devil-may-care attitude, not caring what others thought of them. They'd find a discreet location like a vacant lot or cutbank away from public scrutiny, and they'd sit down together and pass the jug around until it was empty. In the small cow town of Williams Lake, many residents and business owners alike knew them on a first-name basis. They had a history with the place and families who cared for them.

Writer and former *Williams Lake Tribune* editor Diana French once described the Troopers as people who had been displaced by technology. A decade or two earlier, the great ranches of the Cariboo Chilcotin had relied on a big pool of workers to cut and stack their hay using teams of horses pulling mowers, hay rakes and wagons. They'd use derrick poles to build gargantuan stacks of loose hay that weighed several tonnes each.

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Large extended families of Indigenous people took hay-cutting contracts with various ranches, and the work would last several months depending on the size of the ranch and the weather. This work fit into their other seasonal activities such as hunting, fishing, trapping and gathering resources from the land, or other contract work like fence building, log cabin construction and cutting firewood.

Then the ranches started automating. Tractors replaced horses, and square balers, bread loaf stackers and eventually round balers replaced the need for large hay crews. So the Troopers had a skill set that was no longer required or valued, and many drifted to the urban places to find work. Some got stuck there. Alcohol was a big factor. That's how it was with Second World War vet Thunder Bert and his wife, Adele. Bert got the nickname Thunder because of his booming voice and outspoken manner. In his prime he was a physically powerful man. Now in his mid-sixties, he was somewhat diminished but still a capable worker.

Bert and Adele were from Esk'et (Alkali Lake), a Secwépemc community fifty kilometres south of Williams Lake along the Dog Creek Road. The couple had their own space staked out in Sonny Gilbert's Troopers' Shack, with a mattress on the floor and blankets and bags of clothing and personal belongings piled nearby.

The derelict building had no electricity or running water but was kept warm thanks to a wood-fired barrel heater turned on its side, which was also used for cooking. The rounded top of the barrel had been pounded flat to accommodate pots for cooking or heating water. Sometimes people cooked food inside the barrel over coals when the fire was low. An outhouse provided toilet facilities, and household water was dipped from the nearby marsh and strained through mosquito netting, and preferably boiled before consumption.

For the past year I'd worked as a human rights street worker out of the Friendship Centre. The Williams Lake Human Rights and Civil Liberties Association partnered with the Cariboo Friendship Society to fund the position. I spent a lot of time attending court, making sure people had legal representation, and helping people snagged in the bureaucracy to fill out the paperwork to get the services they were entitled to. My year's contract was almost over, and I had been offered a more formal position as a legal information worker. That would mean becoming a paralegal employed by the provincial government, but becoming a civil servant was the furthest thing from my mind. Earlier that year I'd bought a trapline and had ambitions to drop out of society and live in the bush. There was a groundswell of young people at that time "going back to the land."

Seeing Thunder Bert frustrated in his attempt to get out of the cold gave me an idea. He was broke and his next welfare cheque wasn't due

for a while, so I asked if he was interested in cutting firewood to earn a few bucks. His immediate response was yes. I had the use of a three-ton truck and a chainsaw, so I took him back to the Troopers' Shack and asked if there were others who wanted to get into the firewood business. Enthusiasm was high and five or six volunteered, saying they'd be willing to go the next day. So that's how it started. I handed in my resignation and told my employers I wasn't going to pursue the civil servant job, and I launched our new business venture.

Members of our crew fluctuated depending on who was up for working. Usually there were five or six. Besides Bert and Adele, the core group included Charlie Casimer (also known as Charlie Charlie or Charlie Eye), his brother Billy Casimer, Peter "Sleepy" Alphonse (Charlie's sidekick), Robert Gilbert, Sonny Gilbert, Duncan Amut, Stanley Peters, Clara Bob, Ernie Bob, Muldeen Whitey and Tommy Wycotte.

The local sawmills had cull piles of dry logs that were too rotten, big or gnarly to go through their processing facility, and the Lignum sawmill gave us permission to cut their culls for firewood. Most of the Troopers knew folks who needed firewood, so we had no shortage of customers.

The undisputed leader among the Troopers was Tommy Wycotte, a Secwépemc man in his mid-fifties from Sugar Cane, the colloquial name for T'exelc First Nation, at the opposite end of Williams Lake from the city. I'd met Tommy Wycotte nearly two years earlier in the spring of 1974 on a tree-planting job with the Ministry of Forests. They hired maybe two dozen of us and paid us by the hour. The managers divided us into three crews: the white men in one crew, the white women in another crew and a crew of Indigenous planters. Then they tried to get the crews to compete against one another. Tommy was the obvious leader of the Indigenous crew. I remember him showing up for work in the morning with his devil-may-care attitude, somewhat hungover, waiting for the crummy to pick us up. What stood out most was his foot attire, a pair of caulk boots without laces. None of us non-Indigenous planters even had caulk boots, but at least our boots had laces. I remember the Forest Service bosses coming over to our crew planting on the sidehill and chiding us because the other two crews, the women and the Indigenous men, were planting way more trees than we were. We were slow and methodical and probably averaged 300 trees a day each. The women planted a similar number, but the Indigenous group led by Tommy Wycotte averaged a whopping 1,200 trees each. Of course we were paid by the hour and not by the tree, so we didn't have much incentive to work any faster. But Tommy, wearing boots without laces, quadrupled our production.

On our firewood-cutting project, Tommy usually operated the chainsaw while others split the big rounds and loaded them into the truck. We delivered wood to places around town and farther afield to

Deep Creek (thirty kilometres north), Lac la Hache (sixty kilometres south) and Riske Creek (fifty kilometres west). I would take a couple of crew members to deliver the wood and unload the truck, while Tommy and others continued cutting, splitting and piling the wood in the mill yard. At the end of the day we'd cook up a big meal at my place and share it together. It was too perfect, really, and I started entertaining the fantasy that we had somehow stumbled on the cure for chronic alcohol addiction, because it seemed their preoccupation with chasing a wine jug had somehow dissipated. Of course I was naive, and my learning curve was about to experience a sharp upward trajectory.

Our daily routine consisted of me driving down to the Troopers' Shack in the morning, picking up those who wanted to work, heading off to Lignum's cull pile and then delivering firewood to customers. This day, Tommy Wycotte didn't join us. It was curious, but I didn't think too much about it. Charlie Casimer, despite his glass eye, could sharpen and operate the chainsaw proficiently, so I left him in charge and took off with a couple of workers to make a delivery at Soda Creek. When we got back, Tommy had shown up and had resumed his usual role running the chainsaw. But something wasn't right. He was dishevelled, his hard hat tipped to one side, and he was standing off balance with one hand on the saw screaming full throttle through a 1.2-metre-diameter Douglas fir log. Suddenly things became clear. Tommy's absence that morning was explained. It was Welfare Wednesday, and he'd received his stipend from the government and had purchased a forty-pounder (a forty-ounce or 1.14-litre bottle) of whisky and brought it to our workplace. The rest of the crew was tipsy too, so that was it for our workday.

We continued our woodcutting campaign throughout the winter but had to implement a few guidelines. This included no booze while working. At some point I think I conceded to purchasing a small bottle of wine at the end of the day to share with our evening meal, but that's about it. We divvied up the income from our wood sales so the truck got a share, the saw got a share, and the workers and I split the rest.

“NOW HE'S COME BACK FOR THE ROCKS”

Charlie Casimer had three names: Charlie Charlie, Charlie Eye and Charlie Casimer. It wasn't unusual for Indigenous people to have two names in those days. People often took their father's first name as their last name, only to have official record keepers give them their father's last name for a surname. So it was with brothers Charlie and Billy Casimer. Their dad was Charlie Casimer, so they often went by Charlie Charlie and Billy Charlie. Then, to complicate things further, Charlie Charlie lost an eye through some unfortunate accident. How it happened I never heard, but he received a glass eye fitted into his eye socket. Hence his descriptor name, Charlie Eye.

When I first came to Williams Lake in 1973, I lived communally with a group of friends in three shacks at 280 North Mackenzie Avenue. In our attempt to survive and stretch a dollar, we regularly “shopped” in the big white bin disposal containers behind the grocery stores and brought home cartloads of expired but quite palatable food. Our property backed onto an alley that ran between Mackenzie Avenue and First Avenue North, and across the alley from our house was the service entrance to Famous Bakery, owned by Ole Henriksen. Ole often had day-old products we could get at half price. The Troopers visited the bakery too, hitting Ole up for his day-old products. Often they had no money so they would prevail on his good graces for items he might give them for free.

Ole told me Charlie Eye was one of his regulars. He said Charlie always had a sob story to soften him up, especially if he was broke. One of his favourite tricks for gaining sympathy was to pluck out his glass eye and hold it up as evidence of his misfortune. Ole said whenever he saw Charlie reaching for his glass eye, he’d stop him mid-sentence. “That’s okay, Charlie, have some bread. Have a bag of cinnamon buns!”

Charlie Eye had a sharp wit and a poignant sense of irony. In the early 1970s Gibraltar Mines came to town and opened its copper and gold mine near McLeese Lake, just a few kilometres up the highway from Charlie’s home community of Xat’sull. Charlie had a guttural voice because of an injury to his vocal cords and always spoke with drama and great intention. His classic comment about Gibraltar Mines was short and to the point: “The white man took our land. Now he’s come back for the rocks.”

The three-ton Dodge truck played a significant role in forging a link between the Troopers and what can only be described as a colourful chapter in Cariboo history. The truck was owned by a communal group of back-to-the-landers along the Horsefly Road east of Williams Lake. They called themselves Ochiltree Organic Commune. When I first met them in 1973, they owned a small acreage on the shores of Rose Lake, halfway between 150 Mile House and Horsefly. The group was headed by Jerry and Nancy LeBourdais, both in their late forties, who had abandoned a comfortable lifestyle in North Vancouver several years earlier to take up a communal life in the Cariboo. Jerry had had a well-paying job at the Shell oil refinery in Burnaby and was a labour activist and avowed communist. Nancy had worked as a nurse in a hospital. Around 1971 they had sold their house in the city and given up their careers to follow their dreams. Nancy said that on their journey north Jerry had tossed his wristwatch off the cliff at Jackass Mountain in the Fraser Canyon, insisting he’d be operating on a different time schedule from then on.

In his activism Jerry insisted that a true communist needed to live on a commune. They had a blended family that included Nancy's son Raymond and Jerry's daughter Linda and son Louie, all in their early twenties, and Lorraine, the teenage daughter they had together. Besides their own kids, several idealistic young people had also joined their pilgrimage from North Vancouver to form the commune.

In 1975 Jerry and Nancy sold their small farm on Rose Lake and moved lock, stock and barrel to an isolated homestead on the Borland Meadow owned by a local man, Willie Wiggins. The Borland Meadow was a big wild grass meadow a dozen kilometres off the Horsefly Road up a seasonally impassable wagon road. It was off the power grid, so the group needed a place to store their truck where the engine block could be plugged in during winter. They also required someone to haul ranch supplies out to them from Williams Lake on a regular basis, and that's where I came in. I kept the truck at my place in Williams Lake, where it could be plugged in when temperatures dropped. When it wasn't needed to haul stuff for the commune, I had free use of it to haul firewood.

Once a week or so, I'd drive big loads of wheat, oats, barley, hen scratch, building supplies, hay or whatever they needed to the end of the Borland Meadow road in Miocene. Meanwhile the commune had purchased a team of big Percheron horses, Meg and Maud, from Lester Dorsy in Anahim Lake, and Rod Henniker took on the role as teamster. He'd be waiting with the horses and wagon, or sleigh in winter, and would load up with as much weight as he figured the horses could pull. Often I'd ride into the Borland with him and spend the night. The next day we'd come out for another load and I'd take the empty truck back to town.

One day I brought Bert and Adele with me on the rendezvous to meet Rod. They rode into the Borland Meadow on the wagon and ended up spending several days there. It amazed me how the Elders from Esk'et came alive in the commune environment. Every time a squirrel would chirp in the trees, Adele would joke to Bert, "There's a dollar." She told us how they used to shoot squirrels by the hundreds back home and get a few cents apiece for them. It was a way of life they had known from childhood, and how they made their money.

Bert and Adele started a trend that other Troopers followed, and the commune welcomed the extra help and expertise. It was a perfect fit, really, because most of the communards were young urban idealists in their early twenties bent on learning back-to-the-land skills. The Troopers had first-hand knowledge of haying with horses, building Russell fences, building log cabins and feeding animals. The commune had a mixed farm with a menagerie of animals, including pigs, chickens, ducks, geese, horses, goats, sheep, beef cows, milk cows and of course dogs and cats. For the Troopers, a stay on the commune gave them a welcome respite from the street. There was no pay involved, but they got plenty of good food



The CEEDS (Community Enhancement and Economic Development Society) work crew harvesting potatoes on Tommy Wycotte's land at Sugar Cane. Left to right are Jerry LeBourdais, Willy Hurst, Harriet Tenale, Lorraine LeBourdais, Tommy Wycotte, Tony Bob, Rosie Laceese, Ernie Bob, Terry Peters and Gussie Williams. Photo courtesy CEEDS

and rest and healthy activity, and their skills were valued and appreciated. Then when the street called out to them, they'd head back into town.

Jerry and Nancy were the de facto leaders of the group, though they insisted that everyone was equal. They were older and had sacrificed the most to make the commune a reality. After all, it was the sale of their property and their life savings that financed the operation to keep this great social experiment going. But officially there was no hierarchy. Jerry had a vision of a network of rural agricultural communes spread across the landscape to replace the capitalist system. It was a pipe dream, quite literally. Great discussions would ensue after toking copious joints of homegrown in the Borland Meadow headquarters cabin, where chickens regularly made their way inside and laid eggs in the woodbox.

The commune's use of the Borland Meadow was by the good graces of Willie Wiggins, whose grandfather Jimmy Wiggins had purchased it in 1911. Besides the rustic log cabin and barn, the group set up several wall tents with log sides heated by airtight wood heaters to accommodate everyone. Besides a share of the Borland Meadow with a neighbouring ranch, there were several other meadows that could be used for cutting hay or pasture. The loose barter arrangement with Willie included feeding his small herd of cows and providing sides of pork, bacon and other products like eggs and vegetables from the garden. Plans were made to expand the operation by building a two-storey log dormitory to house the many guests who were gravitating to the scene.