

Living off the band land

Brian Hutchinson, in Oliver B.C., [National Post](#) Published: Friday, January 18, 2008

Clarence Louie's office is a mess. Documents and books are strewn across the floor. More stacks of paper sit atop his cluttered desk, where he sits, simultaneously pecking at a computer keyboard and answering a telephone.

Appointments are lining up outside. "Tell them they'll have to wait, I'll be a while yet," Chief Louie barks at his Osoyoos Indian Band receptionist.

He has just returned from a local hospital, here in B.C.'s south Okanagan region, where one of his band members is ailing. Later, he's got an important council meeting to chair. One meeting, one crisis, one project at a time. His job as band chief is about identifying priorities, he says. Right now, tidying up his office isn't one of them.

Making money is. So is managing the band's wealth. While some bands in Canada spend heavily on deluxe new administration buildings and large council digs, the Osoyoos band, considered one of the most entrepreneurial and financially successful in the country, operates from what is basically a cluster of attached mobile homes.

"So, what's wrong with that?" asks Chief Louie, not one to mince words. "We've outgrown the office. That's a good sign. We had one bookkeeper [and one part-time bookkeeper] working here when I was first elected chief."

That was 24 years ago, when Chief Louie was just 24 years old and the band had but one business, a vineyard that it leased to viniculture giant Andres Wines Ltd.

Today, the band has 12 full-time number crunchers, providing oversight to five band-owned businesses that comprise the Osoyoos Indian Band Development Corporation. The CEO, its founder and its most public face is Clarence Louie.

The corporation's best known operation is a winery that sits on the southern tip of the reserve, on Osoyoos Lake. Established in 2002, with initial production of 15,000 cases of red and white wines, Nk'Mip Cellars now pushes out 18,500 cases a year and is aiming to increase production to 25,000 by the end of the decade.

Nk'Mip (pronounced ink meep) sources most of its grapes from its own vineyards; the oldest were planted in 1968, by Andres. There are now 94 hectares of vines planted on the reserve, which runs north from the town of Oliver, where the band office is located, to Osoyoos, an arid, scenic tourist Mecca that sits smack on the Canada-U.S. border.

Osoyoos is where most of the band's business activities are centred. The winery is perched on a bluff overlooking the lake; it is surrounded by new vineyards. A sprawling retail shop offers almost a dozen different Nk'Mip varietals, most of them red.

Next to the winery is a new hotel complex, the Spirit Ridge Vineyard Resort and Spa, where deluxe rooms with stunning views go for \$350 a night. Last summer, its first, the resort was almost fully booked. Ninety-three separate "villas" are privately owned, by native and non-native individuals, on a quarter-share basis; another 132 in a new Phase 2 complex have already been pre-sold.

Behind the hotel is a brand new nine-hole golf course, Sonora Dunes. Beyond that sits the Nk'Mip Desert and Heritage Centre, a sort of interactive interpretive museum that occupies a stunning rammed earth building.

Down the bluff, next to Osoyoos Lake, is Nk'Mip Campground and RV Park. The park is fully serviced and offers amenities such as an indoor swimming pool and a beach bistro, and 323 individual lots for rent. Dozens of sites are occupied on a semi-annual or annual basis by massive, \$100,000 buses and camper units.

Obviously, business is good. And the Osoyoos band likes being in business. In 1995, for the first time in its history, the band received more revenue from its companies than from government transfers; it hasn't looked back. Every band member - there are 450 - receives an annual dividend, derived from business profits and lease income. This year, the dividend will ring in at about \$900 per person, says the Chief.

The band has become one of the South Okanagan's largest employers, with a job for any band member who wants one. Still, despite the jingoistic slogans that he likes to plaster on large signs around the reserve - for example, "Our Ancestors Worked for a Living, So Should You" - some won't pick up a shovel, or a computer, says Chief Louie.

He loathes laziness, and complains at length about "distractions" that make some youth on the reserve distant and disconnected from active reserve life. Cable television is a scourge, he says. So are video games. He can't stand the way some young band members dress, calling today's gangsta-wanna-be style "that baggy pants and hat-on-backwards bullshit."

Chief Louie might be described as a cranky dictator; he is the only chief most Osoyoos band members have known, or can recall. But he didn't appoint himself; he was elected to the job, over and over. Nine times, so far. And while he may be a details man, he has given no thought to a plan of succession.

Running the band and its businesses efficiently, expanding its base of operations, and making profits remain his focus.

The Osoyoos are blessed, he acknowledges, with productive, desirable land. But other native bands should follow his lead, he says. Indeed, Chief Louie conducts business development seminars for band administrators from across Canada. "Other reserves have physical attributes, too, and they do nothing with them," he says.

For decades, even the Osoyoos did little with what they had. In the past, band members received large reserve land allotments from Indian agents and, later, from the band's former chiefs and council members.

These allotments were usually chunks of what was then considered the most desirable land, used as pasture, in the middle of the reserve along creek beds, where members could water their cattle and horses. In later years, the allotments sat empty and become unproductive. Meanwhile, land on the edges of the reserve suddenly became prized, because it was best for vineyards and other commercial enterprise, such as residential and commercial development.

Chief Louie put an end to the "corrupt" practice of allotting land to favoured or well-connected band members, and began a long, slow process of buying back allotments from fellow band members. And he continued to exploit what were, in fact, the reserve's most attractive assets, on the reserve's fringes.

For the Osoyoos, the grape became an important, lucrative commodity, almost like oil. And now the focus is shifting to residential and recreational development, to be enjoyed primarily by non-natives.

Chief Louie is now eyeing the north end of the reserve, hard up against the town of Oliver. "See, white people ain't going to live in the middle of an Indian reserve," he says. "They will live closer to the infrastructure [of an off-reserve town]."

The Osoyoos Indian Band Development Corporation is also buying land off reserve; it can do that now, because it is flush. Recently, the corporation bought a small chunk of a company that operates Mount Baldy, a local ski area. Chief Louie says the band might acquire even more.

There are also plans to build an industrial park on reserve land. It is meant to be "green," although Chief Louie dislikes the trendy connotation. "I think most environmentalists are phony," he declares. "Most of the environmentalists I know are these 50- to 60-year-olds who have already made their millions. I guess they are feeling guilty for whatever they've done to the Earth."

No such worries on the Osoyoos reserve, where the land is put to work, much to the benefit of those who live on it.

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