

Regional News *Prairie Region*

Front Runners

By Wayne Hunt, Correctional Officer, Pe Sakastew Centre

Bill Chippeway and I have worked together for five years at Pe Sakastew Centre, an Aboriginal healing lodge in Hobbema, Alberta. I am a correctional officer and Bill, a middle-aged Aboriginal man from the Lake Manitoba First Nations Reserve, works as an Admission and Discharge officer.

I discovered that Bill Chippeway has a quiet and unassuming air and possesses much knowledge and wisdom. This made me want to know more about his history. When I became more familiar with him, he told me about his background and an experience he once had. He informed me that he had been one of the torch carriers in the 1999 Pan American games in Winnipeg. In the spirit of celebrating the achievements of Correctional Service of Canada staff, I would like to share his story with Let's Talk readers.

Bill was born at home on his reserve. As a youngster, he lived an idyllic outdoor life, swimming, fishing and especially running.

When Bill was 13 years old he was taken from his family and sent to a residential school. At this school he was forbidden to speak his native language or participate in Aboriginal cultural events. Bill was not allowed to contact his parents; therefore, the other students provided his only comfort.

While attending the residential school, Bill began to run long distances. Soon he became known in the surrounding community as an excellent long distance runner. In 1967, he was selected by the organizers of the Pan American games in Winnipeg to be part of a team to carry the torch from Minneapolis to Winnipeg. The team consisted of ten Aboriginal runners who carried the torch for 800 kilometres over five days. Bill said each runner would carry the torch for one mile, and then pass it to the next runner. The route traced the same path that Aboriginal runners used to carry the mail hundreds of years ago.

Bill remembered his thoughts during the run in 1967:

“The sound of my footsteps keeps me focused. The sun is just coming up at the end of the road, and it is a nice view but kind of lonely. The other guys are asleep in the bus behind me. They said I run to get away from the school, but I like to think I run to return to my culture, from the darkness to the light, to the Creator.

Another semi-trailer is coming up behind me. It causes a hurricane when it goes by. I could run into the ditch, but there are thistles and branches there. I am dammed if I do, and dammed if I don't. It's kind of like the school. Maybe if I move just a little bit, DARN! ”

After the runners completed the 800 kilometres, they arrived at the stadium where the Games were being held. At this time the torch was taken away from the Aboriginal runners, and given to an Anglo-Canadian athlete who carried it into the stadium. The Aboriginal runners were directed to watch the opening ceremonies on television in a local restaurant, where breakfast had been prepared for them. Bill said that the runners did not question decisions due to their experiences in residential schools. The runners were disappointed, but acquiesced to the organizers' decision. After the Games, the runners returned to their regular lives.

In 1999 the Pan American Games were held in Winnipeg again. A sports journalist decided to write an article about the 1967 Aboriginal runners. As a result, and to recognize their accomplishments, the 1999 organizers asked the 1967 runners to bring the torch into the stadium.

The reunion with his former running mates was an emotional experience for Bill. The original group had been reduced to eight, as two of the runners had died. The remaining eight runners stood in large canoes that were carried aloft into the stadium. One of the runners carried the torch in the lead canoe. Bill said that he felt many emotions that day, but mainly he felt pride and joy. When the runners entered the stadium there was an intense gust of wind that lasted for several seconds, and then it disappeared as suddenly as it had arrived. The torch was passed to another Aboriginal athlete, a previous gold medal winner, who lit the flame to start the Games.

Bill learned later in a dream that the intense wind was the two deceased runners joining them in the stadium.

The government of Manitoba made an official apology to the runners and Bill said that they were treated very well during the Games. A short documentary was made about the runners called *Frontrunners*. The remaining eight runners also established a scholarship fund for three Aboriginal students throughout Canada.

I was amazed at the interesting life that Bill Chippeway has lived, and I was glad I took the time to get to know him better. .