

REVIEWS: OTHER MEDIA
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FILM REVIEW

TAKING CARE OF OUR OWN

16mm. Colour. 54 minutes.

VTR 3/4" Beta or VHS cassettes.

1983. Bortnick Films.

Producer: Bortnick Film Productions Ltd.

Director: Norman Bortnick

Purchase: \$880; Rental: \$95.

Distributor: Bortnick Film Productions Ltd.

848 Jubilee Avenue,
Winnipeg, Manitoba,
Canada, R3L 1P9.

Taking Care of Our Own outlines the next logical step in bringing about change to help resolve the problem of "heritage" instruction and "cultural preservation" that was stated to be so lacking in the review of the film *Our Children Are Our Own* by Donald J. Bourgeois (CJNS 2:391). This documentary presents the inevitable stepping stone, as it were, in bringing about the changes so drastically needed in child care services as they pertain to Native people. It is a most important film due to two very significant ideals. Firstly, that a child-care program should be based on a community's standards of what is best for the children and secondly, that family reunification rather than just apprehension, adoption, or becoming a ward of the state should be a primary objective.

Taking Care of Our Own is a uniquely crafted documentary in that it does not dwell on a single point for a certain period, and then moves immediately to the next; rather it flows through social, political, and legal problems at perfectly timed segments.

At the beginning of the film, a deserted father explains how his children were "taken" away from him. The father, knowing that his wife deserted him and his children, knew that he would be unable to care for them when he was at work. He called the local CAS (Children's Aid Society) for help. They (the CAS) asked him to bring his children in to town (Portage la Prairie, Manitoba) so that they could be "helped".

Subsequently, as the story is told, his sons were transferred to Brandon, and finally to the United States. Mr. Merrick was both emotionally and physically hurt as was evident from his tone of voice. He loved his children, Keith and Eric, and "each night [he] would wonder where they were, and what they were doing."

Mr. Merrick has been very fortunate. He was able to regain legal custody of his sons, but this is but one case. Many parents were not as fortunate.

At this point, the political and legal ramifications of the film come into play. Tim Maloney, director of the Dakota Ojibway Child and Family Services Inc. (DOCFS), the recently developed Tribal Council Child Care agency of Southwestern Manitoba, shows his dismay with the way native children are treated. Most children are not put into native foster or adoptive homes because of the neglect that both the Children's Aid Societies and the Provincial Community Services and Corrections agencies exhibit.

Now the film takes another shift to explain why there is a need for an agency that is responsive to native children and their family needs within the community. Eva McKay, a Sioux Valley elder, explains that when the Children's Aid Society apprehends children and takes them away, they are not serving the children's best interests. As Mrs. McKay states, most foster children of native ancestry usually come back to the reserve in time. It is at this point that it becomes obvious that these children are not only dismayed, but also very confused. To alleviate this situation, she emphasises that native children should be kept in their communities as well as with native parents.

Continuing with a discussion of the "best interests of this child", one spokesman states that the whitemen do not know the way of the reserve and as long as they don't understand, they can not effectively make policies to benefit Indians. He emphasises the fact that they don't understand native values.

In part, because the values are misunderstood, language and culture are destroyed. Nothing has been done to better Indian lives and as long as such ignorance persists the traditional white "well-meaning" policies will simply not progress toward white goals, let alone native goals.

At this time, the film outlines the successes of the DOCFS. The staff is happy with the serious commitment of the communities and their fellow workers. They are proud because they are providing a service to Indian people, which is nationally known as well as run by Indian people. At this point, statistics show that the DOCFS has more than surpassed the services of the local Children's Aid Societies.

The establishment and eventual success of the DOCFS was brought about by obtaining the facts of the present system instead of constantly relying on hearsay for establishing a viable complaint. At first, member bands of the Dakota-Ojibway Tribal Council thought that this kind of agency was only for others to operate. But as research proved that the hearsay of cultural child abuse was even more factual than anticipated, they began planning the agency.

The DOCFS now:

- a) provides a much wider range of services than the Children's Aid Society.
- b) helps those who have problems with alcohol by referring them to AA meetings or Dry-Out Centres for eventual reunification with children previously apprehended or placed in care.
- c) apprehends and places children who are in need of care.
- d) uses temporary placements of two weeks on the reserve or nearby

reserve where the fostering parents know the natural parents, and thus, maintain cultural objectives.

- e) provides a consistent pattern of help emanating from the communities which in turn promotes community involvement and awareness.

As is obvious, the DOCFS is working more towards family reunification and preventative services rather than just looking after the "best interests of the child(ten)."

Now the film shifts to views of the children concerned. The children who are interviewed express a positive attitude towards being placed on a reserve where they have some freedom to hunt, fish and trap rather than being placed in an institution behind barred windows.

To this point in the film it does not seem to be obvious that the DOCFS have had any problem setting up an adequate servicing agency. Well, this is not entirely true. At first, the agency had a problem with underqualified workers. Lacking in this field, they had to look for capable and receptive people for their program. They sought only those people who were genuinely concerned with these problems to work within the program and communities.

Now these problems have been alleviated, and the DOCFS runs their own training program. Training is on a weekly and bi-weekly basis. This training is extensive and lawyers are always consulted to see if a case is to be pursued.

Many aspects of what the DOCFS has accomplished since their beginning are also present in the film, although not all these accomplishments are dealt with formally. One very important accomplishment that needs to be noted here is that they have successfully reunited previously adopted children with their families. This precedent has been set by them and they should be proud to know that they are doing a great job.

It appears that the film *Taking Care Of Our Own* has made it clearly evident that the present system of child-care as it pertains to native children in Canada is not a very viable system when it is administered through the local Children's Aid Societies and provincial offices. This fact alone has initiated a response and a much more acceptable policy of Indian Child Care, as it is administered through the Dakota-Ojibway Child and Family Services Inc. and similar Indian designed and operated child care agencies.

Not only have the problems been pointed out but a solution to the problems is being exercised. Hopefully such agencies will continue to persist and provide for all native peoples. The precedent has been set and now other native organizations are following on their path.

Another very important obstacle which the DOCFS has overcome is that of communications between adopted children and their parents. Previously, parents were not allowed to keep in contact with their siblings through letters or telephone. Now, an agency has been set up in Winnipeg for the benefit of both native and non-native families so that a rapport can continue between adopted children and their parents, if this is to the children's interest. The most important aspect of this accomplishment is that the breakthrough on the communication barrier has benefited all who have encountered the frustrations of a segregated family due to the adoption policy.

The final accomplishment which will be dealt with in this paper (although not the final accomplishment of the DOCFS) is the milestone which this agency achieved in late 1983. The DOCFS has been mandated with adoption placement powers which it had previously been refused. This facet of approval, which came from the Provincial Government, has established the DOCFS as a full-fledged child caring agency. It had previously only had the responsibilities of apprehensions and foster care privileges but now they have met the criteria of obtaining adoptive credibility. Now the responsibility of caring for their own children has obviously been transferred to their care.

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