A HISTORY OF THE VANCOUVER ABORIGINAL FRIENDSHIP CENTRE IN AN
AGE OF ABORIGINAL MIGRATION AND URBANIZATION

By

WILLIAM G. LINDSAY

B.Ed., University of British Columbia, 1996
M.A. Candidate (History), University of British Columbia

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Department of History
The University of British Columbia
Vancouver, Canada

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Abstract

The Canadian urban cultural mosaic is made up of many different ethnic groups. These groups came to Canadian cities over time and used different means to help themselves in the adaptation process, to a new way of life. These groups included not only those from around the world, but those who migrated within the borders of Canada, seeking new and better lives in urban locales.

This paper will explore the issue of urban migration in the years following the Second World War and the concomitant means used in the adaptation process. Although the experience of overseas immigrants will be examined for issues of contrast and comparison, this paper will specifically explore the experience of Canadian Aboriginal people. As natives moved to Canadian cities in the decades after 1945, Aboriginal friendship centres sprung up across Canada to assist them in adapting to, what was to them, a totally alien culture.

This paper will explore the friendship centre phenomenon, particularly the role of the Vancouver Aboriginal Friendship Centre -- the largest of its kind in North America. How and when the friendship centre grew, who was involved in its formation and growth, and what import it had on incoming native people to Vancouver, will be the main issues considered in this work.

Although some primary and secondary sources were used in research, the lack of such sources has led me to rely on oral interviews for information for this project. Since the interviews were conducted with surviving founders of the Vancouver Friendship Centre, the use of such first hand information has proved most valuable and insightful.

The Vancouver Aboriginal Friendship Centre played a key role in the adaptation of the native to big city life. The centre started small, grew, changed with the times, and provided much valuable assistance to natives seeking help at a time when they often had no place else to go.
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Part One

Introduction: The Non-Aboriginal Migration Experience

The experience of immigrants -- foreign and internal, rural and urban -- adjusting to new surroundings with the help of others, is a theme that has engendered a large array of literature in Canadian sociology and history. Aboriginal people were and still are, part of this process, as this thesis will examine. This work will be quite revealing when one compares the rates of success in coping and adapting to a new lifestyle, and to the different means that were used in the adjustment process for these different groups. There were failures, successes and surprises.

The Greeks of Vancouver, by James Patterson, paints a relatively rosy picture while detailing the history of twentieth century Greek migration to Vancouver, Canada. Patterson acknowledges that new Greek migrants encountered the usual difficulties associated with immigration, including language problems and all-around unfamiliarity.

The Greeks, however, had a lot going for them, including a long proud history. Patterson notes that the Greeks were historically a strong, esteemed people, ones who had resisted assimilation since time immemorial. The result of this resistance was an ongoing development of a certain ethos, a belief in the “rightness of the Greek way.”¹ This way of thinking came to Vancouver with the many Greek immigrants seeking a new life and helped them to cope in their new surroundings.

The Greeks had more than a strong historic ethos going for them, though, in their adaptation to a new land. Special organizations, like the Hellenic Cultural Community Centre, were set up to assist incoming Greek migrants. This association provided help in the form of English classes, academic and vocational training, cultural programs, legal assistance, and assistance for the elderly.² The Greeks thus appeared to recognize the importance of having a meeting place in the community, a locus where they could engage not only in cultural banter, but could be helped in the adaptation process in a qualitative manner.
The Greek community in Vancouver also took important steps to preserve the culture they had left behind. Greek schools were set up to teach the Greek language to the young and to preserve Greek culture. Greek newspapers were published, Greek restaurants proliferated, and the Greek Orthodox Church remained a pillar of the Greek community, as well as a place for cultural assemblies. A virtual "Greek Town" appeared in Vancouver's Kitsilano area, a strong indicator of the ethnic solidarity and strength of the Greek people. This fact is reinforced by the comment of one Greek Vancouverite when he noted that, "you feel secure about being Greek here."

Patterson thus makes the point that in spite of the pressures of immigration, Greek people were adept at adapting to their new home, in a new country, in an urban setting. The Greeks were able to bridge both worlds, learning about the new, while establishing remnants of the old in the midst of the new. They did this remarkably well for the reasons mentioned above, especially when it came to establishing their own form of friendship centre, a Hellenic Cultural Community Centre. According to Patterson, this centre was very important in giving assistance to Greeks needing help.

The Political Refugees, by Karl Aun, tells a similar story to that of the Greeks, but concentrates on another group of European immigrants: the Estonians. The Estonians came to Canada in the decade following the Second World War. They came to Canada in virtual block groups and because they were fleeing communist oppression, came more as frightened refugees than immigrants. One of these block groups, composed of about 1,500 Estonians, settled in Vancouver shortly after 1950.

Aun makes many interesting points regarding these Estonians as they worked hard to successfully adapt to Canadian life. As a group, they were small and cohesive. Many had formerly attended or graduated from European universities. They knew each other well, bonded together well, and helped each other extensively. In a new land, in a crowded urban setting, they made a group commitment to remain Estonian, to preserve their language and culture, and to pass this knowledge onto the next generation. This is quite remarkable considering the size of the group, considering that virtually no more Estonians emigrated after the initial flurry in the decade after 1950, considering that
the Estonians set up few ethnic organizations (none of which really brought them all together), and considering it was the dual demon of fear and force that coerced them to leave their homeland in the first place. Yet, the Estonians, as a whole, flourished. Aun informs readers that the Estonians took advantage of the economic boom in 1950s Canada, especially in the industries of plastics and textiles. Using their significant entrepreneurial and organizational skills, the Estonians, according to Aun, made a considerable contribution to the Canadian economy and the arts over the years.

What contributed to the Estonian success story as they adapted to and contributed to Canadian life? It would appear their ingrained work ethic, their high education, their pride of culture, and their cohesiveness as a series of small groups, all contributed to their success at adjustment to life in postwar urban Canada. Interestingly, Aun makes no mention of the importance of a cultural centre as a contributing factor to this overall positive situation.

The Italian people are famous in Canada for having created seemingly ever-expanding “Little Italys” in Canadian urban areas, Vancouver included. This point is fortified in Clifford Jansen’s, Italians in a Multicultural Canada. Jansen asserts that it was easy for Italians to want to congregate as a group in Canada, since this what many of them were used to in Italy, where few lived far from the village bell.

In such compact urban settings many ethnic institutions sprang up which strengthened Italian culture in Canada: stores, churches, cinemas, recreation halls, mutual aid societies, clubs, and media outlets—all Italian, and all successfully contributing to community nexuses. A sense of security flowered under such arrangements and the shock of life in a new country, in an urban setting, was lessened considerably as a result.

The Italians have, according to Jansen, been strong contributors to the Canadian cultural mosaic. Their strong sense of community, institutions set up to support that community, and a seemingly natural inclination for hard work, no doubt enabled the Italians to contribute in this way. Interestingly, Jansen notes that recreation halls, mutual aid societies, and clubs had much to do with the
Italian success story. This, as shall be learned later, is what the friendship centres tried to do for natives.

Not all Canadian immigration stories, however, are positive and based on immediate success. The experience of immigrants to Canada from the Caribbean area is one such example. The West Indians In Canada, by James Walker, is literally an antithesis to the experiences so far considered concerning immigrants who came to Canada from Europe. The West Indian story, relates more to the experience of Canadian Aboriginals in urban areas than it does to the European experience.

The Caribbean area, as a whole, has a history of poverty, European colonialism, and slavery. Emigration became an early tradition, especially among freed slaves, and this custom continued down to the present time. It was especially in the post World War Two years that Canada, like the United States and Britain, welcomed masses of cheap labour from the Caribbean area. From 1950 to 1979 over 250,000 West Indians immigrated into Canada and settled in burgeoning Black districts in urban centers like Toronto and Montreal.

Walker makes clear that feelings of alienation and discrimination permeated the lives of West Indian immigrants in these Canadian urban settings. Due to this and due to strong ties to family and friends left in the Caribbean, West Indians did not immediately fit as well into Canadian culture, as it appears European immigrants did. Measures, however, were undertaken to improve the situation. Black organizations, like the Black Coalition of Canada, were formed which were committed to recognizing common problems and which were committed to mutual action. Over time, such efforts proved successful. Walker notes that West Indians have since made an important impact in Canadian life, with Black policemen, doctors, nurses, teachers, and others, now visible and taking a lead in society.

West Indian immigrants thus faced many problems that were analogous to the experience of Canadian Aboriginals moving to urban settings around the same time. Both groups, for the most part, came from poverty-ridden backgrounds that were rooted in colonialism. Both groups also often faced
the twin problems of discrimination and alienation in the Canadian urban setting. There were
difficulties, but as Walker points out, the West Indians took positive steps to ensure a more solid
footing in their new urban existence. As shall be seen, Canadian Aboriginals took similar steps.

Migrants to Canadian urban settings did not always come from distant lands. The New Urban
Poor, by S.D. Clark, points out that many poor, rural, non-Aboriginal Canadians made their way to
urban settings in the postwar era to seek better lives for themselves and their families. Many such
individuals often found such a move to be a real challenge. Many had their own heavily ingrained rural
ethos and came to the city lacking the necessary aptitude and skills to make their way successfully in a
new and unfamiliar social order.23

As Clark points out, many poor rural migrants were simply overwhelmed by a fast-paced,
technological urban way of life. Such migrants soon found that lack of education and technical skills led
directly to low-paying jobs, menial work, unemployment, or welfare.24 Such migrants ended up in a
particular social grouping known as the “core poor” or “problem families”, whose residences were
usually found in downtown slums or on skid row. Poor and uneducated, these poor rural migrants often
found themselves trapped in a culture of poverty, one they would share with many incoming native
people.

What did the urban non-Aboriginal poor do to cope? Clark points out that many just gave up
and headed back to rural areas after a period of experimentation. Many, however, chose to remain in
the city choosing the urban culture with its concomitant poverty over a move back home.25

It can thus be seen from these examples, that immigrants from other lands fared much better
overall in the adaptation process to Canadian urban life than did the migrating rural poor. There are
numerous reasons for this. As The New Urban Poor notes, foreign immigrants had no choice but to
change and adapt. They made a “sharp break” from their homeland, a break fortified by the huge travel
distances involved. The capacity to move on and get ahead in their new land was thus maintained and
encouraged although they maintained traditions, in a modified form, as a coping strategy. By contrast,
Canadian rural migrants required no such “sharp break”, had no compelling pressure to change, and if things got really bad, they just moved back home to the country.  

The above studies raise the fundamental question of how the rural-urban migration of Aboriginal people compared. They too sought better lives in the cities of Canada in the postwar years, as places where potential advancements could be made. How did they fare in the city? What role did friendship centres play in this process? These questions will be addressed by looking at Vancouver and the history of its Aboriginal Friendship Centre.
Part Two

Methodology and the Oral Tradition

This thesis examines the Canadian Aboriginal people who emigrated to urban settings in the decades following the Second World War. It focuses on the role that Aboriginal friendship centres played in facilitating this movement, paying particular attention to the Vancouver Aboriginal Friendship Centre. Its history, its changing mission, its effectiveness, and its successes and failures, will all be examined in the context of postwar Aboriginal migration and urbanization.

Little survives in the way of primary sources regarding the founding of the Vancouver Aboriginal Friendship Centre and its evolution. One small file of materials kept in a steel cabinet basically made up the "archives" of the centre. This thesis thus mostly relies on oral interviews for its primary material. In a way, though, this is highly appropriate. Aboriginal societies have strong strands of oral culture permeating them, through and through. Oral culture has traditionally been the Aboriginal way of transmitting history and learning from one generation to the next. It is with this cultural tradition in mind that I conducted oral interviews to use as the primary basis for this thesis.

A list of surviving founding members of the Vancouver Aboriginal Friendship Centre was obtained from the Vancouver Friendship Centre's archives. After the appropriate University of British Columbia ethical review forms were completed and approved, by the UBC Office of Research Services, I contacted and interviewed these founding members. Interviewees included Chief Simon Baker, Judge Alfred Scow, and Ms. Marjorie Cantryn-White. Three comprehensive sets of interviews were completed with these three founding members, the contents of which form the heart of various portions of this thesis.

Ms. Gertie Guerin and Dr. Minnie Croft, two other founding members, were originally set to be interviewed. However, Ms. Guerin passed away in February, 1998, just before the interviews were to begin, and Dr. Croft was unable to participate due to illness. In their place, two other appropriate persons were interviewed, this to provide background information to the other three completed
interviews. The two persons who provided supplemental information were Ms. Bernice Heather and Ms. Minnie Kullman. Ms. Heather was a founding member of the friendship centre in Kelowna, British Columbia, and since many of her insights support those of the three Vancouver Friendship Centre founders, her comments are important and beneficial to this thesis. Ms. Kullman has been associated with the Board of Directors at the Vancouver Friendship Centre since the mid-1970s. In fact, she presently serves as the President of the Vancouver Aboriginal Friendship Centre Society. Her association with the friendship centre, however, goes as far back as the late 1950s when she was a student. She provides many interesting insights into life around the Vancouver Friendship Centre in the early years of the organization.

Examples of the relevance of oral traditions are provided in the book, You Are Asked To Witness, edited by Keith Carlson. Herein is provided a description of a traditional Stó:lō gathering, a feast. On such occasions, even in modern times, written recordings are forbidden. There are speakers, witnesses, symbolic body language, and solemn commands to, “witness, respectfully watch, and carefully remember the events you are going to see and hear this evening.” Nary a pen nor pencil is in sight. In fact, each witness speaking usually reminds those gathered to keep Stó:lō oral traditions strong.

You Are Asked To Witness also provides examples of oral narratives, and their importance to Stó:lō culture. The conclusion of the matter is that there is a “continuing relevance of oral traditions to the Stó:lō,” a relevance that goes back to the beginning of time.

The existence of oral traditions, such as this, is something that has existed as a pan-cultural phenomenon for Canadian Aboriginal societies. As Peggy Brizinski in, Knots In A String, notes:

The first written records of the customs and appearances of Aboriginal Canadians date from the time of contact with Europeans. We have some accounts of the early historic periods from Native oral tradition, but written documentation was provided primarily by non-Natives: explorers, fur traders, and missionaries.
Many non-Aboriginal historians also comment on the use of oral history as effective and reliable history. *Listening To History*, by Trevor Lummis, addresses some of the main doubts regarding use of oral history -- e.g. that oral history is reshaped and reconstructed through time by new values, attitudes, and perspectives. Lummis, however, minimizes these doubts by addressing what is seen as the incredible value of the oral interview. Three examples, from many provided by Lummis, are as follows:

1. [The] great advantage of the retrospective interview [is that it] enables historians to intervene directly in the generation of historical evidence relating to the recent past, and so...[it] becomes possible for the historian to collect the type of evidence which customary documentary and material sources have not supplied.

2. Oral history can also be, “more informative and precise than even various forms of autobiography and personal testimony simply because it is the product of two people [the informant and the researcher] and as such, is focused more on historical than biographical concerns.”

3. Oral history is able to, “give a voice to underprivileged sectors of society,” a voice it might not otherwise have.

All of these points are applicable when it comes to considering a history of the Vancouver Aboriginal Friendship Centre. The history of the friendship centre is fairly recent, there was little in the way of other sources available, the interviews proved informative and precise, and the interviews have given a voice to a formerly underprivileged sector of society: urban Aboriginal people.

*Oral History and the Local Historian*, by Stephen Caunce, also reiterates the importance of oral narrative as history. He states that, “without oral recording, large tracts of human experience [would] simply vanish.” This is especially true in the case of the Vancouver Aboriginal Friendship Centre. With little in the way of archival materials available, the history of the founding of the Vancouver Friendship Centre might have been lost forever, had not this series of interviews with the founders been completed. This thesis is attempting to do as Caunce suggests, when he writes that use of oral narrative as history is one type of historical source that has been neglected and, “has needed to have a spotlight turned on it to make people aware of it.”
Julie Cruikshank's important study, *Life Lived Like A Story*, bridges the gap between oral traditions, oral interviews, and oral history. She discusses the values and complexities of interviewing peoples who are skilled in oral tradition.\textsuperscript{38}

The last word on this issue of use of oral interviews for historical purposes, goes to those who were interviewed for this thesis. When specifically asked how they felt about the use of oral history to complete projects like this Aboriginal-oriented thesis, each of these First Nations persons responded in the positive, as follows:

Chief Simon Baker:

That's something we have to try and recognize [oral history] to change...if ever I start writing [a story] in a way an author would write -- a lot of big English words and that --it doesn't sound good to me. A lot of people enjoy my book [biography]. This was written just like me talking. I think that way should be kept.\textsuperscript{39}

Marjorie Cantryn-White:

Oral history is our history, you know...We get a lot of history from our elders, and our elders didn't write anything down...All our teachings from our elders have been oral...that's been the way [of] our people...I think oral history is certainly a lot better than finding it out of the books...because everybody remembers different things about what's happening...I think it's important to have some oral information because that's the way we [Aboriginals] are.\textsuperscript{40}

Judge Alfred Scow:

Well, I have to start off by saying that I do have a bias in these areas because I know [that's ] how the background of our societies, our organizations, of our tribes, our nations, [and] our histories were passed on from generation to generation -- by word of mouth because we did not have any documented history, we didn't have any written history. What we learned was what we heard from our elder[s], our parents, our colleagues. So our knowledge was passed on orally. So far as I'm concerned it is totally appropriate to have this kind of study -- by going to people and getting their recollections.\textsuperscript{41}

Minnie Kullman:

I think it's good publicity for the friendship centre [and] the friendship centre movement [using oral history to make the history of the Vancouver Friendship Centre known]. I think a lot of people don't
know about the friendship centre movement and how many years the friendship centre has been in existence throughout the province [and] throughout Canada. I believe there’s 122 friendship centres throughout the country. I think it’s good for other people to know that we’re here and that we do service our people. They are our primary concern and I think it’s very good and I’m quite happy to be able to assist you in any way.

Bernice Heather:

I’m all for the use of oral history in a more relaxed way. I think we should be able to, you know, just sit down and tell our story. I realize the importance of being able to do things in the western way, you know, but I also believe that our oral tradition should survive and should be used. I don’t know if you’ve ever heard any of the traditional story-tellers. They can keep you mesmerized for hours on end and the knowledge in there is fantastic...In the write-up here [thesis interview] it’s just like as if I was talking...I think it’s important to do things our way too, so I put [the] recollections of [the] Central Okanagan Indian Friendship Society experiences, a history of sorts...[in] my [oral] style.

It can thus be said that oral history is indeed important to Aboriginal people and is an excellent foundation with which to build upon, a history of an Aboriginal organization like the Vancouver Aboriginal Friendship Centre. The weight of native history and culture, the word of various non-Aboriginal experts, and the sayings of these five noted native persons, make this so.

One other vital source of primary information came to light as this thesis project progressed. Marjorie Cantryn-White was able to bring forth a folder full of old and yellowed newspaper clippings from the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, clippings that she had carefully preserved for decades. Most of these clippings, depicting the founding and growth of the Vancouver Aboriginal Friendship Centre, were in a very fragile, although readable state. With Ms. Cantryn-White’s permission, I carefully photocopied all of these clippings and pasted them into a large scrapbook. The end result is a scrapbook, of 40 pages. Each news item is now preserved in chronological order on numbered pages. This scrapbook will be given to the Vancouver Friendship Centre at the completion of this project.

Some of these newspaper clippings are marked in various ways, giving the names and dates of the newspapers they came from. Most, however, bear no such identification, meaning their source is
lost. Hence, for the purpose of documentation, when information is used from these newspaper clippings, for this thesis, the page number of the scrapbook will be acknowledged.

This thesis will be valuable for many reasons. There is, first of all, a dearth of literary material dealing with the friendship centre experience in the context of Aboriginal migration and urbanization. This thesis will add to the available canon.

Second, the project has uncovered a number of historical resources which I will present to the Vancouver Friendship Centre at the conclusion of my work. A bound copy of the thesis itself, the 40 page scrapbook of newspaper clippings, the five audiotaped interviews with those closely associated with the friendship centre’s founding, and full transcripts of all five of these interviews, will all be presented to the Vancouver Friendship Centre as a gift. These materials will give future researchers of the friendship centre’s history a larger set of important resources to work with than has been available previously.

Finally, the story of the Vancouver Aboriginal Friendship Centre will be available in one source package. Up to now, only bits and scattered pieces of information regarding the centre existed. The fact that a source pertaining only to it, is available will be valuable to the centre itself and to those who wish to do further research in this area.
Part Three

The Aboriginal Experience: The Friendship Centre Phenomenon

With eyes tightly closed
ye must dance.
To you who dare to see
Forever red thine eyes will be.

An Indian Song

In the early 1950s groups in several large Canadian cities began to push for a specialized agency to meet the needs of the many native persons who were migrating to urban settings. In 1951, for example, Toronto natives set up the North American Indian Club, this to provide guidance to natives moving to the Ontario capital.

The first official friendship centre in Canada opened April 1959 in Winnipeg, Manitoba. The specific mandate of this centre was to provide guidance and counsel to incoming native people on matters relating to employment, housing, education, health, and other community services. This mandate was to provide a model for others to follow. Within the next few years, friendship centres opened in cities across Canada, including Vancouver, Calgary, Edmonton, Regina, Kenora, and Toronto.

In British Columbia, The Vancouver Indian Centre Society was incorporated as a friendship centre in 1963. It should be noted, however, that a group of people had been providing services to native people in Vancouver for years, this under the auspices of a quasi-friendship centre organization known as the Coqualeetza Fellowship Club.

During the 1960s, other friendship centres were founded in communities across British Columbia, including Prince Rupert, Fort St. John, Nanaimo, and Williams Lake. This trend continued into the 1970s, as the communities of Kamloops, Terrace, Quesnel, Kelowna, Dawson Creek, Fort Nelson, Smithers, Vernon, Merritt, Mission, Port Alberni, Prince George, Lillooet, and Victoria all created their own friendship centres.
The initial goal of the friendship centre was to "[provide] the Indian with a place where he is accepted socially and where he can find advice and direction with understanding." As with the first friendship centre in Winnipeg, this would primarily include providing guidance and counsel on matters relating to employment, housing, education, health, and other community services. One early observer found a friendship centre involved in such diverse activities as counseling, court work, employment and housing referrals, recreation, functioning as an Indian Club, and functioning as a clothing supply centre. There was thus a lot going on, as friendship centres aided natives in their adjustment to the urban world. They did this by either instituting programs or directing natives to agencies where their problems could be solved.

A feasibility study, by Peat, Marwick and Partners, done in 1975 for the purpose of finding a more ideal friendship centre location in Vancouver, identified four distinct groups of needs that a friendship centre like the one in Vancouver was fulfilling up to that time:

1. **Social Services.** An Indian Friendship Centre should provide social services such as personal and career counseling. It should function as an information and referral centre, offering general advice and assistance to urban Indians with regards to housing and employment.

2. **Community Centre.** An Indian Friendship Centre should function as a community centre and should meet the recreational needs of the urban Indian, providing a place for social, educational, and cultural activities. Thus, a centre would include such things as a gymnasium, club, and craft rooms. It would also serve as a drop-in centre, a place where one could meet fellow Indians and be sure of a friendly reception.

3. **Housing.** An Indian Friendship Centre might include a hostel to meet the emergency housing needs of transient Indians or it might provide similar accommodation for Indian students visiting the city or for delegates in town for a conference on Indian Affairs.

4. **Showplace.** An Indian Friendship Centre might also act as a [cultural] showplace for the Indians in the city. The centre could be a focal point for the native people of the entire province, as well as for the native community in Vancouver. The centre could be the site of displays of Indian culture and perhaps [a place to ] sell Indian artifacts.
These were goals officially adopted by friendship centres across Canada. Those who used the friendship centre, found that the experience there came to mean different things to different people. Here is a sampling of published comments from ones who availed themselves of British Columbia friendship centre services, as far back as 1959:

"The friendship centre is the place you go to recharge your batteries and get a morale boost."

"The centre provides a feeling of acceptance."

"They feel free to come in and tell us their problems. I'm one of them [native] and they know it; I'm familiar with their background."

"The centre provides a positive alternative to the bar scene and allows native people to come by for coffee, browse in the centre's library, find out about different classes, and just plain socialize."

"Friendship centres... [bridge] the gap between the native and non-native community."

"Above all... a friendship centre can help to prepare a native person to meet white society..."

"The friendship centre [is a] key in bridging the two cultures and in retaining the important aspects of native culture."

"It is important to have a physical building where people can go and feel welcome when the reception in other parts of town might not be so positive."

The friendship centre thus became a locus of not only help, but comfort. This in spite of the fact that so many different native cultures were coming to the various centres. There was and is no uniform Indian culture in Canada, so it was not easy to establish social contact with other urban Indian people. What the friendship centre attempted to do was to create a congenial atmosphere, an environment free from tension, so its users could freely communicate. Providing, or referring ones to helpful tension-free programs was one way to accomplish this. Another way, was to employ as large a native staff as possible.

There was a cultural component to the friendship centre, as well. Native people in urban settings, even if they adapted well, were often alienated from traditions and cultural values. Friendship
centres tried to rectify this by organizing programs, over time to help native people preserve the skills, rituals, and ceremonies of their ancestors. An example of this is found at the friendship centre in Fort St. John, British Columbia. Here the Keeginaw Friendship Centre buys and sells native crafts, organizes cultural dinners, offers beading and leather work classes, and has Elders' Gatherings. All of this contributes to a healthy sense of native well-being and raises public awareness of the native contribution to the community.

Thus, although friendship centres were originally set up as providers of services and as referral agencies, a cultural component has definitely crept in over time. This has only added to the sense of well-being visitors have felt around the centres, and has justly become one of the tenets of friendship centre existence.

The friendship centre movement in Canada operates beyond the local level doing so on both national and provincial planes. The National Association of Friendship Centres (NAFC) is located in Ottawa. This association grew out of annual meetings in the 1960s where friendship centre officials from across Canada met to reach mutual goals. In 1971 a national office was set up and the NAFC was born.

The NAFC gives a national focus to the friendship centre movement. It does so by doing the following:

- By providing news updates on government policies;
- By advising members of activities of successful programs at other centres;
- By circulating pertinent information through the provincial and territorial associations;
- By making sure that friendship centres have a say in decisions affecting them by government departments, especially the Secretary of State;
- By keeping in contact with other national native organizations across Canada;
– By allowing a forum for better communication and problem-solving through the national office’s community interaction program;

– By providing a view of the “big picture”, beyond the immediate parochial concerns of each individual centre.\(^{60}\)

The provincial-level friendship centre movement in British Columbia began in 1972 with the formation of the Pacific Association of Communications in Friendship Centres (The PACIFIC group). This organization was replaced in 1982 with the British Columbia Association of Indian Friendship Centres (B.C.A.I.F.C.).\(^{61}\) This newer association is part of a network of provincial and territorial associations across Canada. Two of the major goals of the B.C.A.I.F.C. are to accomplish the following:

1. To improve communications among BC friendship centres and promote a strong sense of unity and cooperation.

2. To reduce the isolation of individual centres and improve information flow between communities.\(^{62}\)

The B.C.A.I.F.C. represents British Columbia’s 21 member friendship centres and also provides the following specific services:

• Organizes lobbying efforts

• Is involved in public relations initiatives

• Institutes special projects

• Institutes educational workshops

• Provides training sessions

• Distributes a monthly newsletter

• Reports on issues of interest

• Participates in national negotiations with the Secretary of State to formulate new programs for friendship centres

• Keeps all centres up to date on policies affecting them\(^{63}\)

The B.C.A.I.F.C. thus gives friendship centres in British Columbia a united voice at the provincial and national levels. With united organizations spread across the country, the friendship
centre movement might appear, at first glance, to run like a well-oiled machine. Programs have adapted with the times or been added with seemingly positive results. Problems, at first glance, might seem minute and easily overcome. Critics, if any, must have been few and far between. Was this really the case?

As early as 1966, there were groups calling for improvements to be made to make friendship centres more effective. One such group called for the following to be implemented:

- Friendship centres should be more active in contacting recent arrivals.

- Centres should be more flexible.

- Centres should get back to their original purpose, serving as referral centres...The staff should not be almost completely taken up with social service work, as is often the case.

- Centres should not spend time and money in doing those jobs which are publically or voluntarily offered elsewhere.64

These are four examples of recommendations that were given at a 1966 conference in Winnipeg, Manitoba, a gathering which concerned itself with the theme, “Indians and the City.” What was specifically done at individual centres, regarding the recommendations from this conference is open to conjecture. But the complaint that the friendship centre should be more active in contacting recent arrivals was still a source of contention at the national level in 1970. In that year, a researcher noted that there was no service in place to contact natives in the city. The friendship centre’s services were only available to those who sought it out, and many natives never paid a visit to the centre or were totally unaware of its existence:

One of the major failings of the centre is its restricted ability to be in contact with all Indians within the community. If the centre, because of its structure cannot do it, then it ought to erect para-centre structures that could successfully reach [those that are] at present unreachable.65

The friendship centre also endeavored to eliminate situations where natives new to the city, were shuffled from one social agency to the next, as they pursued specific services. Some friendship centres tried to organize a central system in conjunction with local social agencies to make the natives’
transition to the city that much smoother and prevent "running around." However, what often resulted was confusion and antagonization between friendship centres and other welfare organizations. Hence, in spite of the best efforts and intentions of many, cooperation with other agencies often became a thorny problem, because they provoked jurisdictional conflict.

Another major problem for friendship centres over time, has been the issue of funding. A delegate at a 1966 Winnipeg conference concerning "Indians and the City", noticed that friendship centres were not only overloaded in the amount of work they did, but they also faced uncertain financial situations:

They are doing fine work but they are too few and too limited because of uncertain finances. In some provinces the centres receive funds from a "shared pie" source -- the pie does not grow as the number of centres grow, the slices become smaller! Yet the number of Indians using the centres increases while the resources remain static or shrink! Surely the governmental sources of finance could arrive at some better plan, especially with the excellent work being done by the centres.

The problem of underfunding did not abate over time. In 1970, Nagler's study of Indians in Canada's cities, noted that friendship centres received grants from various levels of government for operation and, in some instances, were sponsored by church-centered groups. Nagler also notes, however, that the volunteer efforts of natives and non-natives, were the primary reason friendship centres could function. According to a study done in 1977, native friendship centres still faced "severe financial limitations."

Lack of adequate financing has thus been a key issue in the operation of any friendship centre over time. In fact, the effectiveness of what the friendship centre was trying to accomplish was often directly correlated to available financial resources. A broad study done on this issue in a 1970 report, cited that a lack of money led to a shortage of proper facilities, and this led to problems. In fact, the federal government allocated less than 350,000 dollars to Canada's 37 friendship centres in 1970. This amounted to less than 10,000 dollars per friendship centre!
One observer, quoted by James Frideres, connected this lack of financial resources to the failure of many friendship centres to accomplish what they wanted to achieve:

To date, the friendship centres have not greatly helped the young Indian to adjust to urban society. Bear Robe [1970], in a comprehensive report on friendship centres across Canada, points out that lack of money is the predominant issue. The centres vary in effectiveness and in attempting to assess their usefulness. Some have been "taken over" by small cliques of Indians and provide very few services for the new arrivals or permanent settlers.\textsuperscript{71}

Even though this commentator is critical of the centres, he acknowledges that the centres did provide a "drop in" place for native people. For example, in 1965 more than 15,000 Aboriginals partook of the Toronto centre's programs, over 1,000 used the Winnipeg centre's services, and about 2,000 came to the Calgary centre seeking help for various difficulties.\textsuperscript{72} In spite of this apparent success, the above commentator complained that one of the few functions of the friendship centre was that it became a mere "enclave" into which the native could "immerse himself," rather than assist him in adaptation to big city life.\textsuperscript{73} The well-known bon mot could perhaps be applied here, about the critic knowing the cost of everything, but the value of nothing!

Comments by others show that friendship centres across Canada were esteemed and valued by many who either used their services, or who studied their functions in the urban community. The following quotes from various studies made over the past three decades demonstrate this point:

"Friendship centres have offered very profound service..." (1966)\textsuperscript{74}

"The Indian Friendship Centre appears to be the most influential organization within the city endeavoring to promote successful urban adjustment among the Indians." (1970)\textsuperscript{75}

"According to the Minister of Municipal Affairs in Saskatchewan, 'They [friendship centres] show results'." (1972)\textsuperscript{76}

"The Friendship Centre is absolutely crucial." (1977)\textsuperscript{77}

Thus, down through the years many observers and clients of the friendship centres have realized the importance of them as places serving and assisting Aboriginal people in the urban community, particularly in the areas of housing, employment, social service, and cultural programs.
The friendship centre came to mean different things to different people. For example, I remember the Edmonton Friendship Centre in the 1970s and 1980s as a place to go for social and recreational pursuits, including weekend dances, Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, boxing lessons, weight training, and basketball. The atmosphere there was always congenial and this gave much comfort to me when I was new to city living.

It is within this larger context for friendship centres that I now consider the history of the Vancouver Aboriginal Friendship Centre using where possible, the words of those who were there at the beginning.
Part Four

The Vancouver Aboriginal Friendship Centre: A History

There is no single source that provides an in-depth and comprehensive history of the highly successful Vancouver Aboriginal Friendship Centre. There are scraps of information in a few secondary sources, with primary sources of information being even more limited. The small bits of history found concerning the centre are noted for their brevity and their attempt to condense four decades of history into a single paragraph or two. An example of these thumb-nail histories is this sample from a Vancouver Friendship Centre brochure:

HISTORY OF VAFC

The Vancouver Aboriginal Friendship Centre Society (VAFC) was established in the early 1950s under the name of Coqualeetza Fellowship Club. After this it moved to West Broadway under the name of the Vancouver Indian Centre Society. From 1970 to 1979 the Centre was located at 1855 Vine Street. A survey of the City of Vancouver indicated that the majority of Aboriginal people lived between Cambie and Nanaimo Streets (the population estimated to be 40,000 to 45,000). The Board of Directors subsequently implemented a relocation plan and moved the Centre to the present location at 1607 East Hastings in 1981. The new location is therefore easily accessible for the Aboriginal community.

The Centre's mandate is to meet the needs of the Aboriginal people in urban areas. All services are developed to incorporate the philosophies of Aboriginal Culture and advocate on behalf of urban native peoples.  

A few other brochures found in the Vancouver Friendship Centre’s archives provide similar skeleton accounts. Usually, dates, name changes, building moves, and founding members’ names are only found in the space of a paragraph or two. The accuracy of these vignettes is uncertain. For instance, there is some controversy over the exact founding date of the Vancouver Friendship Centre. This came to light in a minor imbroglio that erupted when the Friendship Centre prepared to celebrate forty years of existence in 1994. A brochure put out by the centre raised this issue by stating that, “The Vancouver Aboriginal Friendship Centre has been offering services oriented towards Aboriginal families and children in Vancouver for over forty years.” This provoked a 1995 letter to the Executive
Director of the Vancouver Friendship Centre by Marge White, one of the centre’s founding members, to correct the matter of the centre’s origins. She wrote:

For sometime, I have had concerns about individuals stating the number of years the Vancouver Friendship Centre has existed. I have made efforts to correct this in the past but it has gone unnoticed.

I am not sure who determined that the Centre will be celebrating 40 years of existence. In January 1963 a committee was struck to set up a social service centre for migrating Indian people [coming] into the city. A constitution was drawn up and sent to the Registrar of Companies...It was from this committee that the Vancouver Indian Centre, first opened its doors at 1200 West Broadway. So my calculations is that the Indian Centre Society is now in its thirty-second year.\(^80\)

Why did this apparent contradiction exist? Why the discrepancy in founding dates? Ms. White provides the answer in the final portion of her letter:

I have a scrap book which goes back to the days of the Coqualeetza Fellowship, which is the mother organization of the friendship centre movement. I enclose for your information, a page from one of my scrapbooks and I hope that will help you to get a better understanding of the history of the centre. I was one who helped establish the centre and I haven’t lived in this city for the last forty years.

With good wishes, just want to set the record straight.

In Friendship,

Marge White\(^81\)

Ms. White thus cleared up a minor fallacy, innocent as it was, concerning the exact founding date of the Vancouver Friendship Centre. As Ms. White notes, there was an earlier incarnation of the Vancouver Friendship Centre that went under the guise of the Coqualeetza Fellowship Club. Formed in 1954, this club was a forerunner to the modern Vancouver Friendship Centre, which in itself did not officially come into existence until 1963.\(^82\) The issue at stake here, is that Ms. White, one of the founders of the Vancouver Friendship Centre, does not consider the Coqualeetza Fellowship to be an official incarnation of the Vancouver Friendship Centre, although it may have been so in a de facto
manner. This contrasts with the claims of some now working at the centre as well as, with information found in the centre’s brochures.

Ms. White’s letter points to the origins of the Vancouver Friendship Centre in the history and circumstances behind the forming of the Coqualeetza Fellowship Club. Although not officially considered a friendship centre, this organization of Coqualeetza Residential School alumni nonetheless laid the ground work for the Vancouver centre and as such, is important in a consideration of the history of the Vancouver Friendship Centre.

In 1950, former students and teachers from the Coqualeetza Residential School near Sardis, British Columbia, organized themselves as an alumni association in Vancouver -- under the banner of the Coqualeetza Fellowship. This was done at the behest of Reverend G.H. Raley, a former principal at the school from 1914 to 1934. At first, membership was open only to those connected with the old school. However, in 1956 membership expanded to include anyone who was interested in working for the betterment of the migrating native person to Vancouver. The fellowship subsequently organized into the Coqualeetza Fellowship Club in 1954 and shortly thereafter it opened an information office in downtown Vancouver, at 422 Richards Street. A newspaper article from the era explains the exact purpose of the club, which included the promotion of native arts and crafts:

The group was organized to assist native Indians with their problems, to provide better understanding between natives and non-Indian people, and to assist Indian youth to take their place in the community. Another objective has been to assist and encourage continuance of native arts and crafts and help find a market for them.

Marge White, who was one of the founding members and early presidents of the Coqualeetza Fellowship, is quoted in the same newspaper article as saying that the aim of the fellowship was to, “get a centre for Indians coming into town.” She notes, this would be done by “[finding] an old house,” which could then be converted to serve the dual purpose of providing “sleeping accommodation” and a “recreation centre.” All Indians were helped at the club regardless of their status. Although the Coqualeetza Residential School was a denominational institution, the club was
completely non-denominational. The Fellowship also sent field workers out to help natives in trouble with the law or to direct ones to places where they could get food and shelter. This shows that members of the Coqualeetza Fellowship were not just going to rent a house and wait for incoming natives to come to them. Their concerns were such, that they sometimes did the seeking themselves.

The Coqualeetza Fellowship Club thus was one of the first native organizations that delivered social service to natives coming into Vancouver. Other groups, such as church organizations and the YWCA, also lent a hand. In these fairly informal ways people offering an altruistic hand to other incoming natives assisted in their adaptation to life in Vancouver.

The words of the founding members or ones associated with the club in its early years provide information about who was involved and what they hoped to achieve. When asked about who first brought up the idea for a friendship centre, the informants offered various suggestions about who was involved and where they congregated:

Chief Simon Baker said:

Oh, I would say several people [from] way back -- Ed Kelly from Chilliwack, he's 94 now, and Minnie Croft was one of the original ones. And a couple of others -- they are not living today -- that went to school, to the Coqualeetza Fellowship School. That's how they called the first group, Coqualeetza Fellowship. And they had little places in Vancouver. We kept one building, then we moved to go to another building. Finally, we got more people involved...

Judge Alfred Scow observed:

I don't know who first brought the idea up. I think that's where you need to talk with the Coqualeetza Fellowship people. I know one of our objectives when we were talking about establishing and formalizing the Indian Centre, as we called it in those days -- the Vancouver Indian Centre -- we wanted a service for people coming into the city so they could have a place to go so that they could get some help in finding where to go for housing, where to go for services, where to go for jobs, and so on. We learned that many were coming to the city and didn't want to leave the city, so we wanted to provide a resource for them. That was what our main objective was...
Minnie Kullman commented:

...when they first formed the Vancouver Friendship Centre it was to help the people that migrated to the Vancouver area. Now before the friendship centre was officially formed into the Vancouver Indian Centre it was called the Coqualeetza Fellowship which apparently was downtown at the corner of Hastings [Street] and Richards and that was their first office down there. It was to help the people that migrated into Vancouver. You know, to find housing and different accommodations and I guess to more or less orientate them to the city.  

Majorie Cantryn-White provided the most extensive commentary:

...the idea of an Aboriginal Friendship Centre first came from the members of the Coqualeetza Fellowship. It was the first social agency for First Nations people in the city of Vancouver. The Coqualeetza Fellowship was first -- when they first started it -- [it was] comprised of ex-students and ex-teachers of the Coqualeetza Residential School in Chilliwack. And when they moved to Vancouver and settled in Vancouver -- and these -- it was a mixture of First Nations people and ex-teachers and supervisors of the Coqualeetza Fellowship that were involved in this...the whole idea of starting something...was at a birthday party for an ex-teacher or ex-principal...whose name was Dr. Raley. And while they were sitting around talking, they began to notice that there was an influx of First Nations people coming into the city...the group talked about the different problems, or anticipating problems that First Nations people encounter as they came to the city. And of course the ones most identified were housing, social services, and, you know, education...this small group started their organization in the early 1950s...they actually opened an information office on the corner of Richards and Hastings [Streets] and they provided a lot of the services that the friendship centres, as they are known today, provided...they had a lot of people coming through their offices and asking for different services...it was all on a volunteer basis...all these people were ex-teachers, ex-students, and they really saw a need and they were determined to provide services...that group was sort of a closed group, you know. If you were from or of the Coqualeetza Fellowship School then you were automatically a member of the Coqualeetza Fellowship...so they had sort of a closed membership.  

Cantryn-White was one of those who became involved with the Coqualeetza Fellowship, once the eligibility for membership expanded beyond that of a formal tie with Coqualeetza. She noted the following:

But I believe it was 1956 or 1957 that they opened their membership to anyone that was interested...I became involved in 1957 as a very young girl...because I was a student myself in Vancouver and experienced the
loneliness of not knowing who was here and what to do and all that. I think that’s what really encouraged me to become part of this organization because...it was already providing some services that I saw a void in...I became involved and I was President of the Coqualeetza [Club] three times and I was very inexperienced but you know, you learn as you go along.96

Cantryn-White noted that the organization’s goals changed over the years:

...as they continued their service -- their services as an information centre -- we sat around and said what we tried to identify as most needed in the city. You know, we looked at a centre for people to gather. Did we want a house for students coming into the city? Did we want a group home for families that were coming in? So there were I believe four options that we looked at and we decided that an Indian centre would be most suitable because it would provide a number of services rather than just a hostel...that was the idea we came up with and so the friendship centre movement began...97

Cantryn-White’s pride in the lead they had taken is evident in these comments about the Coqualeetza Fellowship’s contribution to the early friendship centre movement:

I’m going to say this, and I’ve said it over and over because I know the history of how all of this started. We have -- Vancouver and Winnipeg -- this discrepancy about who was the first to get started as an Indian Centre...Winnipeg says that they were the first to open. They were the first centre to open in the sense of a ‘centre’, you know, like a friendship centre today. But with the Coqualeetza Fellowship, you know, the forerunner of all of this, we claim that we were the first in Canada! There was a fellow by the name of John Melling who was with the Indian and Eskimo Association in Ottawa. And the people, the community from Winnipeg called them and said that they had a donation of money from one of their local clubs, and they weren’t sure what to do with this money. And John Melling said at the time, there is a group in Vancouver who is providing a service and I will get in touch with them to see what their long-range plans are...

I can’t really remember what date John Melling gave me but I know it was before...it was early, in the mid 1950s in any case. But he came and interviewed us and got all our information and then went back to Winnipeg and the next thing you know was that Winnipeg was opening their doors...

But that’s the story of how the actual friendship centre movement came about. I think that there were many communities that were probably providing the same kind of services that the Coqualeetza Fellowship were, in other parts of Canada but they were operating in basements or garages or wherever. I think that the concept of a friendship centre was
in the hearts of First Nations people all across Canada but it was like, “How do we get it started? Where do we go?” kind of thing...in any case, that’s how the friendship centre got started...

All of these informants clearly establish that the Coqualeetza Fellowship was the progenitor of the Vancouver Indian Centre. Marjorie Cantryn-White provides further insights regarding the model the Coqualeetza Fellowship Club provided for the beginning of the friendship centre movement in Canada.

All of the informants remembered that the purpose of the Coqualeetza Fellowship was to provide assistance to natives in the areas of housing, education, social services, employment, and urban orientation, a range of crucial services not previously available in Vancouver or elsewhere. Soon after its founding, the Coqualeetza Fellowship decided to expand its services through an Indian friendship centre. Accordingly, in January 1963 a five member committee was formed to look into the official establishment of a Vancouver Friendship Centre. This committee was composed of James Garner, Alfred Scow, Gertrude Guerin, Alvin McKay, and Marjorie (Cantryn) White. They worked hard and fast and eleven months later on, on December 1, 1963, the first official Vancouver Friendship Centre opened at 1200 West Broadway Street.

The laws of British Columbia required that the new Indian Centre Society be registered under the province’s Societies Act. The guidelines provided in this act required that the Vancouver Indian Centre Society establish a constitution. This was accomplished, but there were major hurdles yet to clear.

Judge Alfred Scow remembers estimating and presenting a budget for the proposed centre, and then appealing to all three levels of government for money. As he recalls, the essential funding was, “slow in coming.” Marjorie Cantryn-White remembers going to City Hall on a number of occasions to seek out either a house to begin an Indian friendship centre or the funds to obtain it. As she recalls, “there was always the excuse that there was no money available.”
It took tragedy to finally get government officials to respond. Ms. Cantryn-White noted:

There [were] a multitude of deaths of Aboriginal women...on the streets. They were either...through drug abuse or...alcohol abuse, I believe. But there were a number of deaths that occurred that were, you know, high profile in the news...so we went to City Hall and said, “This is why we need a friendship centre because...these people [would] know where to go if they are in trouble.” So, finally after a lot of persuasion, they agreed that we would have, or that they would support a centre.104

Newspaper articles from this time period confirm Ms. Cantryn-White’s recollection of the urgency involved. One daily from January 12, 1963 flashed out the unambiguous headline: “Social Centre Proposed To Save Skid Row Girls: Concern Mounts Over Alcoholism Death Toll.”105 The article reveals plans under way for a special social centre to save Indian girls from the death, depravity, and alcoholism plaguing them on Vancouver’s skid row. In fact, drinking and brawling had brought the death toll of native women alone, to over 40 in the 1961-1963 time period.106 Blaming the difficult transition from reserve to city, and the fact that once in the city, “they are on their own,” the article goes on to mention possible proposals to help, including a vocational school, an employment agency, and a social centre.107 Other newspaper articles from this time period also drew attention to the need for some kind of urban Indian centre.108

Late in 1963, an article from the Vancouver Sun newspaper announced, “Indian Centre Provided In City.”109 It noted that the new centre would open at 1200 West Broadway on December 1, 1963. Marjorie Cantryn-White, Gertie Guerin, and Alfred Scow were to fill positions of leadership within the new centre. They had raised almost 10,000 dollars that year to get the centre started. Much of this came from a municipal grant. Fifteen thousand dollars was the anticipated annual budget. However, it was hoped, at the time, that additional grants would be received from the provincial and federal governments. The centre would initially advise Indians “seeking jobs, medical aid, and assistance of all kinds.”110 It was hoped that the centre would also serve as a meeting place for the approximately 150 native students attending schools in Vancouver, by offering, “dancing, music, darts, organized games, and a place to just sit and chat.”111
The long-awaited goal of establishing a permanent centre had been achieved. A news item from the *Vancouver Province* newspaper, the day after the opening, however, provides some intriguing insights into the operational problems that the new Indian centre still had to address:

Vancouver’s Indian Social Centre opened its doors for the first time Sunday and now wants community help.

A group of 14 volunteers, mostly Indian, will staff the building -- the old Baynes house at 1200 West Broadway -- for seven hours daily.

But with a budget that so far includes a gift of $5,800 from the city, $2,000 in trust funds, and $400 from an actor’s benefit show, the centre will need community help to provide amenities, says Mrs. Gertrude Guerin, secretary of the centre association.

“We need a record player, recreational equipment, regular donations of coffee, tea, and cookies, card tables for a study room for students, and folding chairs for the recreation room,” Mrs. Guerin said.

The house was rented furnished from the YWCA, but much of the furniture, used for a girls’ hostel will not fit the needs of the centre.

“So far, the only recreational equipment we have is some playing cards and an old Ping-Pong table,” says Mrs. Robert Cantryn, centre association director.

Some church and service groups have offered help, directors said, but are waiting until the centre’s needs are clearer.

“We don’t know who will use the centre most,” said Mrs. Guerin. The first day’s visitors included well-wishers and volunteers offering help, plus a sprinkling of teenagers. “We hope to attract young people by giving them a place to study and a place to gather together.”

Vancouver’s new Indian centre thus began operations. The Coqualeetza Fellowship, so much a part of the background of this centre, remained in existence and planned to move its offices into the friendship centre.

The fight for operating funds was protracted and difficult. The centre’s directors contacted all three levels of government and asked them to pitch in. Marjorie Cantryn-White recalls that one had to keep on the backs of the politicians for help. One could not just write one letter and hope that the government would respond. It was a process of, “letter after letter, contact after contact.”
native organizations and interested individuals were also contacted to see if they could help. Banquets were held, with proceeds going towards the operation of the new centre.\textsuperscript{115} Even though most of the centre's workers were volunteers considerable financial support was needed for other day-to-day operation expenses. There were different estimates of costs but Alfred Scow in 1963 estimated that first year costs alone would be about $22,000.\textsuperscript{116}

There were other serious problems, especially with infighting, in the early years. Most menacing was the internecine fighting with other native organizations, and later, within the executive of the friendship centre itself. These battles were the subject of a newspaper article from March 1963 (found in a scrapbook in the Vancouver Friendship Centre archives) and were confirmed by Chief Simon Baker in a later interview. The newspaper article described disagreements and mud-slinging that occurred when the friendship centre was unable to offer office space to one of the centre's sponsors. Charges of discrimination erupted when the sponsor organization, the Coqualeetza Fellowship, claimed that the friendship centre would not give them space because their group's members were, "better educated."\textsuperscript{117} Chief Simon Baker, who was an early member of the Board of Directors for the Vancouver Friendship Centre, recalled there also was some political infighting over power and money, a fact concurred with by Marjorie Cantryn-White.\textsuperscript{118} Clearly the friendship centre had a rocky beginning. In fact, in February 1965 the \textit{Vancouver Province} newspaper detailed how activities at the new centre had come to a standstill. The principal problem, according to the report, was that, instead of being a referral agency, the centre had become a hang-out place. As one quoted observer noted, "the centre should cater to new arrivals in the city and not be a club for Indians living here."\textsuperscript{119}

Another problem included finding a permanent location for the centre. Over the years the Vancouver Indian Friendship Centre had four different locales. It started out at 1200 West Broadway in 1963, moved to 1655 West Broadway in 1966, moved again to 1855 Vine Street in 1970, and to its present location at 1607 Hastings Street in 1981.\textsuperscript{120} Locations chosen over the years were due to
differing circumstances. Accounting for the first location on West Broadway was the YWCA's willingness to rent the new Friendship Centre Society a furnished house.\textsuperscript{121} The location at 1655 West Broadway was chosen because the centre was looking for more space, in a place that would be more "centrally located in a respectable neighborhood."\textsuperscript{122} The next location, at 1855 Vine Street, was picked when an older but larger church building became available for use.\textsuperscript{123} All three of these sites were mainly selected for the pragmatic reasons of building and site availability rather than for proximity to Aboriginal clientele. The fourth and present location was chosen with much more thought and study. In this instance, a demographic survey of the city of Vancouver had shown that the main concentration of Vancouver's more than 40,000 native people was in the area between Cambie and Nanaimo Streets from 41st Avenue to the Burrard Waterfront.\textsuperscript{124}

A 1975 feasibility study by Peat, Marwick and Partners, undertaken for the friendship centre, determined a new site should meet three principal requirements:

1. [Provide] easy accessibility from the whole area by transit (on or near a major bus route).

2. [Offer] proximity to other facilities which the Indian Friendship Centre could use from time to time; for example, parks, recreation facilities, school gyms and classrooms, libraries, etc.

3. [Include] extra land area for eventual expansion.\textsuperscript{125}

With these objectives in mind, the directors of the friendship centre implemented the relocation plan and acquired the 1607 East Hastings Street property. The newly-located friendship centre officially opened on May 29, 1981 with Chief Simon Baker officiating. This opening marked a new era for the Vancouver Indian Centre Society. The centre's new location was central to the native population in Vancouver and therefore was able to provide a focal point for activities and programs which would meet the needs of the native people of Vancouver for the foreseeable future. In fact, the new building of 44,500 square feet, was the largest urban native cultural centre of its kind in North America. With the concomitant native artwork and the expanded museum piece carvings added inside, the new centre aroused much pride in the Vancouver native community.\textsuperscript{126}
The expanded mandate of the new friendship centre was to achieve the following:

To meet the needs of Aboriginal peoples making a transition to the Urban community, by providing programs in Health and Welfare, Social Services, Human Rights, Tourism and Culture, Education and Recreation, and Equality programs for all genders of Aboriginal people in all age groups. Emphasis will be on the philosophy and values of Aboriginal Culture and Tradition.\textsuperscript{127}

Achievement of this mandate was to be guided by eight philosophical goals:

1. That the Friendship Centre is recognized as a legitimate Urban Aboriginal Infrastructure responding to the needs of Urban Aboriginal Peoples, Groups, and Organizations.

2. Progression of alliance between the Friendship Centre, Bands, Tribal councils, Provincial and Federal Organizations.

3. Advancement of the relationship between the Centre and Non-Aboriginal peoples. In cooperation with the enhancement of Aboriginal issues.

4. Develop Social programs in conjunction with Band, tribal, to peoples living in the Urban setting and extending those services to their members.

5. Develop Programs and Services in conjunction with Non-Aboriginal Groups and/or Organizations.

6. Ensure the Recognition of control and direction of Aboriginal Peoples is respected and maintained.

7. The Friendship Centre establish long term programs and services so that Aboriginal First Nations maintain control of their lives and customs in the Urban Setting.

8. Promotions: In the philosophies and values of Aboriginal Culture and Traditions to other segments of Society and all Municipal, Provincial and Federal Government agencies; To the unique and distinct First Nations Culture.\textsuperscript{128}

The Vancouver Friendship Centre had thus come a long way from being a small office run by the Coqualeetza Fellowship to being the largest native urban centre in North America. With success, it became easier to obtain financial backing. Newspaper accounts show that the provincial government gave only $10,000 in 1966 to help purchase the new centre on Vine Street, but six years later the federal government provided $1.4 million annually for all friendship centres across Canada.\textsuperscript{129}
Although the exact amount provided for the Vancouver Centre at this time is unknown, the situation had definitely improved. Financial conundrums did continue but at least all levels of government were now helping. Similar to its predecessors, the new centre continued to provide aid and referrals in areas such as social services, counseling, housing, employment, and education. It also provided sports programs and other recreational activities.\textsuperscript{130}

The one area that has expanded considerably over time relates to the promotion of native culture. As Marjorie Cantryn-White recalls, the friendship centre always tried to integrate a cultural component into the services that it offered.\textsuperscript{131} However, the initial focus was on helping natives to integrate into the city. In the early years, the direct day-to-day needs of natives largely determined the types of programs offered. Subsequently, cultural concerns received priority because, as Ms. Cantryn-White recalls:

...we have begun to identify that in order to have pride, in order to be proud of who you are and all that, and to have a better understanding of your background...the whole idea of the cultural, the spiritual, the customs, and the traditions [made it] necessary for us to begin to offer cultural activities in the friendship centres...in the early days when we met...there wasn't the pow-wows, there was really no cultural identity to what we were doing...It was like, “We're in an urban setting, so what are the needs of our people as they come into the city?”...you know, social services, housing, and all those other things. So, as we were trying to address all of those issues and all of those needs, we stepped away from our whole cultural values...now the friendship centres, I think, are reviving the whole cultural aspect.\textsuperscript{132}

Ms. Cantryn-White underscores that a major change in outlook took place. The directors began by thinking: “We are in an urban setting, so let's just do what we can to get natives settled as quickly as possible,” but shifted their perspective to: “Let's also instill a stronger cultural component, so they can have pride in who they are, while they get settled.”\textsuperscript{133} For years, cultural traditions and practices exhibited at the centre had a prairie component, with focus on the pow-wow as the main celebration. This reflected the large number of natives who had moved to Vancouver from the prairies, and who came to the friendship centre for assistance and fellowship. In recent years West Coast traditions have also become integral to the centre's cultural activities.\textsuperscript{134} For instance, Minnie Kullman, the current
Vancouver Friendship Centre President, notes that Tuesday nights at the centre are “Family Nights”, where natives from other parts of Canada celebrate their traditional dances, drumming, and singing. Wednesdays, on the other hand, are “West Coast Nights”, where a usual crowd of about 400 will dance, drum, and sing to West Coast musical themes, and where different West Coast native groups will take turns bringing in some of their traditional foods. As Ms. Kullman notes, “[this] encourage[s] our people to keep our traditions alive.”

The Vancouver Aboriginal Friendship Centre thus has a proud history. Its evolution has been gradual and changed as circumstances warranted. It started humbly as an alumni group of a local residential school and progressed to being the largest native urban centre in North America. Its financial circumstances always were shaky, and uncertainties remain, but the centre continues to thrive. There were dissentions within and without, yet it prevails. Countless thousands have been assisted in ways that are long remembered -- a job or house referral, a sympathetic listening ear, a quiet corner to read a book, countless cups of coffee, a place to bounce a basketball or beat a drum -- the friendship centre has meant many things to many people.

Chief Simon Baker remembers the sharing and strengthening of culture that took place at the centre, especially the involvement of the elders. Marjorie Canryn-White remembers the dream of a centre growing into reality. For her, the experience over a thirty year involvement has been overwhelmingly positive. Judge Alfred Scow too found his experience with the centre a source of great satisfaction given it has responded to the needs of an incoming native people -- in helping them find a niche, to get located, or to find a job. Finally, for Minnie Kullman, its the memory of the growth of the cultural component through the years, and the different services the centre provided to many a lonely native person that pleases her. As she recalls, the word got around: “Go to the friendship centre, they'll help you!”

The Vancouver Friendship Centre performed no vast miracles in this age of native urban migration. Social problems persisted, perhaps even grew. But the friendship centre helped in
fundamental ways, giving assistance to the many needy hands thrust out in its direction. Like Mother Teresa in the slums of Calcutta, friendship centre workers did what they could to stem the tide of poverty, isolation, and loneliness felt by the many who sought their help. As one commentator noted, as far back as 1966:

Friendship centres have offered a very profound service...people have been able to get direction and assistance. People who work at these centres have put in a tremendous amount of time and their own money, and gone to great lengths to make these places operate to help people who need it. As Indian people, we must realize we owe many individuals for things they have done.\textsuperscript{140}

Friendship centres supplied help, strengthened culture, and provided a safe haven in the midst of an unfamiliar culture. Dedicated and hardworking, the founders of the Vancouver Aboriginal Friendship Centre along with its many workers and volunteers, should be thanked. They stand as a testament to the spirit of caring, decency, and hard work, which enables humanity to survive and thrive, in whatever circumstances it is thrust.

The friendship centre experience thus compares favorably with the experiences of community centres set up by other ethnic groups. The Greeks and Italians, especially, used such community locuses to strengthen their already vibrant cultures in Canada. There were other community factors at play no doubt, but such centres could only have helped in the adaptation process for these groups.

So it has been with the Vancouver Friendship Centre. There were many factors at work which may have contributed to the failure of many natives in their efforts to adapt to city life in past decades, but the friendship centre was not one of them. It too, could only have helped in the adaptation process, as this paper has ascertained. There is no evidence to suggest that ones concerned about native people in the city used other ethnic centres as templates for the Vancouver Friendship Centre. The friendship centre model and its concomitant ideas were its own. Starting small, out of unique concerns for a unique people, the Coqualeetza Fellowship grew and adapted as the situation warranted. There may
have been parallels with other groups, but for throngs of different people seeking adaptation, correlations were bound to occur.

In the end, there are similarities and differences between all groups of emigrants and how they adapted. Similarities are found in the way they banded together to survive -- some in community centres, others using different means. Differences are found in the backgrounds and cultures of all. The more affluent, educated groups may have adapted easier and more quickly to Canadian urban life for the very reasons which describe them as a group. However, time and circumstance change. Few groups today would be classified as urban and cultural failures. This is because, although it may have taken longer for some to catch up, the urban Canadian mosaic is full of adaptation success stories, Aboriginal people included. The friendship centre has played a key role in this story, in Vancouver and in other towns and cities across Canada.
Endnotes


2 Patterson, 27-28.

3 Patterson, 30.

4 Patterson, 23-24, 32, 37-44.

5 Patterson, 138.


7 Aun, 22.

8 Aun, 26.

9 Aun, 40.

10 Aun, 14.

11 Aun, 45.

12 Aun, backcover, dustjacket.


14 Jansen, 35.

15 Jansen, 36-37.


17 Walker, 6.

18 Walker, 9 and 23.

19 Walker, 18.

20 Walker, 17.


24 Clark, 65.

25 Clark, 80-83.

26 Clark, 5.


28 Carlson, 184.

29 Carlson, 185.

30 Carlson, 185.

31 Peggy Brizinski, *Knots In A String* (Regina and Saskatoon: University of Saskatchewan, University Extension Press, 1993), 46.


33 Lummis, 11.

34 Lummis, 12.

35 Lummis, 20.


37 Caunce, 11.


40 Marjorie Cantryn-White, Personal Interview, 10 March, 1998. Transcript, p. 11.


44 Winona Hanson, *The Urban Indian* (San Francisco: San Francisco State University, 1980), 27.


46 BC Association of Friendship Centres, 11.


48 BC Association of Friendship Centres, 11.

49 BC Association of Friendship Centres, 11.


52 Nagler, 70.


54 BC Association of Friendship Centres, 7.

55 Nagler, 71.

56 BC Association of Friendship Centres, 20.

57 BC Association of Friendship Centres, 20.

58 BC Association of Friendship Centres, 20.

59 BC Association of Friendship Centres, 24-25.

60 BC Association of Friendship Centres, 25.

61 BC Association of Friendship Centres, 24.

62 BC Association of Friendship Centres, 24.
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Frideres, 95.


Nagler, 124.

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Gurstein, 23.

Vancouver Aboriginal Friendship Centre, Vancouver Aboriginal Friendship Centre Society Brochure, 1. (Hereafter, VAFC Brochure).

VAFC Brochure, 1.

Marge White, letter, January 13, 1995, VAFC Archives.

Marge White, letter.


84 Marjorie Cantryn-White and William Lindsay, Compilers, “A Scrapbook of Memories”, newspaper clippings, VAFC Archives, pp. 1 and 5. (Hereafter, Scrapbook).

85 “Profile of Marjorie White,” 42.

86 Scrapbook, 5.

87 Scrapbook, 5.

88 Scrapbook, 5.

89 Scrapbook, 5.

90 Scrapbook, 5.

91 Scrapbook, 7.

92 Baker, 3.

93 Scow, 3.

94 Kullman, 2.

95 Cantryn-White, 4-6.

96 Cantryn-White, 4-6.

97 Cantryn-White, 4-6.

98 Cantryn-White, 4-6.

99 “Profile of Marjorie White,” 42.

100 “Profile of Marjorie White,” 42.


102 Scow, 4-5.

103 Cantryn-White, 6.

104 Cantryn-White, 6.

105 Scrapbook, 6.
Annotated headlines:

“City Could Get Results”: Article describes the efforts of a Vancouver alderman to get some kind of Indian social centre set up, this to assist in rectifying problems experienced by urban Indians. The Coqualeetza Fellowship group is mentioned, as one that, “has been trying for years to gather support for a centre.”

“City Urged To Provide Indian Centre”: Article describes the efforts of a City Council committee recommending that Vancouver provide a structure for the proposed Indian social centre. Providing such a building, it is said, “would help the plight of the Indians on skid row.”

“Recreation Centre Needed For Indians In Vancouver”: Article stresses the need for a native community centre, to assist the more than 2,000 Indians now living in Vancouver. Without an organizational affiliation, it is said, young natives are just, “drifting around...with no roots and no direction.”

City Indian Centre Suggested”: Article asserts that an Indian centre would not help Indians already on skid row but would prevent newcomers from ending up there. The Coqualeetza Fellowship is mentioned as a group that assists needy Indians, but “they (incoming natives) need a centre.”

Committee Plans Centre For Indians”: Article from January 1963, confirms that a committee had been formed to set up a social centre for Indians in Vancouver. Committee members include Alfred Scow and Mrs. R.W. Cantryn.
Scrapbook, 10.

118 Baker and Cantryn-White, 5 and 12, respectively.

119 Scrapbook, 16.

120 “Profile of Marjorie White,” 42; and VAFC Brochure, 1.

121 Scrapbook, 16.

122 Scrapbook, 16.

123 “Profile of Marjorie White,” 42.

124 Vancouver Aboriginal Friendship Centre, “A Brief History,” 1.

125 Peat, Marwick, and Partners, 1 (Part 4).

126 VAFC Brochure, 1-2.

127 Vancouver Aboriginal Friendship Centre, Statement of Philosophies. VAFC Archives.

128 Statement of Philosophies, 1.

129 Scrapbook, 18 and 31.

130 VAFC Brochure, 1.

131 Cantryn-White, 16.

132 Cantryn-White, 16-17.

133 Cantryn-White, 17.

134 Cantryn-White, 17.

135 Kullman, 4.

136 Baker, 12.

137 Cantryn-White, 17-18.

138 Scow, 10.

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Interviews

All conducted, taped, and transcribed by William G. Lindsay. These will be deposited with the VAFC Archives.


Cantryn-White, Marjorie, 10 March 1998.

Heather, Bernice, 12 March 1998.


Scow, Alfred, 22 March 1998.

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