

Peter MacDonald:

For Peter MacDonald, '57elec.eng, November was an important month. As for candidates throughout the country it was election time. For MacDonald in particular it was a time of decision for some 40,000 Navajo voters.

In those November elections Peter MacDonald, University of Oklahoma alumnus, former Polaris missile project engineer, Marine, became the first college graduate to be elected chairman of the 128,000 Navajo Indians.

Officially taking over the post this month, MacDonald's task will not be an easy one. The programs he has outlined promise drastic change in many existing institutions serving the Navajo people in an administration he calls "one of negotiation rather than confrontation."

The Navajo reservation is in the Four Corners area of the United States with parts of it located in Arizona, New Mexico and Utah. It is an area of 25,000 square miles—about the size of the state of West Virginia—colorful, beautiful but barren with its high mesas and deep arroyos.

Among MacDonald's proposed programs are replacement of top Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) officials with qualified Navajo leaders, establishment of a Small Business Resource Division, setting up an Education Division which will lead to Navajo control of education for Navajo students, and some tribal reorganization.

"We know we can accomplish a lot more by talking to people and explaining what we want to do, instead of just confronting people with a new situation," MacDonald said, "but we are definite on what our plans are, and we are not going to be deterred from realizing our plans for progress."

MacDonald's decision to run for Navajo chairman came about a year and a half ago. He had been head of the Navajo Economic Opportunity office for five years after leaving his engineering job in California in 1963 to return to the reservation.

Sooner magazine acknowledges the assistance of Dr. William J. Benham, '56 med, '65 phd, in preparing this article on Peter MacDonald. Benham is a Creek Indian, a career educator with the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and director of federal schools on the Navajo Reservation.



Proud to be a Navajo

MacDonald's early years are not unlike those of many Indians throughout the country. He dropped out of school when he was 12 and spent nearly a year learning the methods of a tribal medicine man, but gave it up because of economic needs. At 15 he joined the Marine Corps serving a little more than two years.

Unlike many of his fellow Indians, MacDonald returned to school when he was 18 at Bacone where he enrolled in the ninth grade. Within nine months he received his high school degree. He went on to attend Bacone Junior College and then transferred to OU.

Heading the massive Navajo Nation is a multifaceted and difficult job. During the weeks following his election MacDonald was busy working with other tribal leaders and conferring with Washington officials. His own job transition was complicated by the firing of Interior Secretary Walter Hickel, a key post for all Indians.

MacDonald's election was no surprise to Navajo election watchers. He defeated the incumbent who was running for an unprecedented third term. What was a surprise was the healthy 6,000 vote margin MacDonald piled up and the fact that some 75 per cent of the eligible voters voted in the two-day election.

As chairman, MacDonald walks a line between continued progress and the need to preserve tribal custom. The Navajos are proud of their language and their unique culture, and part of MacDonald's job is to see that the Navajo traditions are maintained.

At the same time MacDonald's people face a variety of disadvantages ranging from health to housing, from lack of education to unemployment. It is not enough for the tribal chairman to concentrate on improving educational opportunity as the key to improving the quality of the total life. There already are large numbers of unemployed people living in substandard housing, people who need jobs and food and housing now, with or without an education. And so MacDonald must maximize his resources; he must have aides who are experts in land and water rights; he must find industry that can operate profitably in his area and employ his people, and he must do it all without destroying the Navajo heritage.

