“The Most Important Indian”

Puffing a Winston inside his Olympia home, Hank Adams settles into a black leather chair between towering stacks of boxes. The collector holds artifacts from the White House, a seemingly endless chain of documents and photographs—snapshots of a rare life and the life of his longtime friend, Billy Frank Jr.

“What does Billy mean to you?” Adams is asked.

“He’s like the son I never had,” he jokes, forcing a laugh. “We draw much from the same sources, like his dad,” Adams explains. “I came late; Billy was 33 when I became constantly involved.”

Henry Lyle Adams was born in 1943 on the Fort Peck reservation that spreads across 2 million acres of northeastern Montana. Dad Louis Adams was a rodeo star often called the “the best Indian rider out of Montana from between the Wars.” He was drafted five months before Adams was born and suffered injuries to his head, feet and legs during 1945’s Battle of the Bulge.

Adams’s mother, Jessie Adams, later married a Quinault and raised Adams in a large family at Taholah, the tribe’s ancestral village on the mouth of the Quinault River. He grew up exceptionally bright, a “skinny Indian kid with black-rimmed glasses.” Adams was 20 when his crusade with Billy began in earnest. He’d breezed through Moclips High School as editor of the paper, student body president, a top student and a star athlete. The Assiniboine-Sioux spent two years at the University of Washington before trading his college education for a real-world calling. He later became a self-taught expert of Indian law, serving as lay counsel with such distinction that many incorrectly assume he holds a law degree.

Billy and Hank stand at the Nisqually River, a focal point of the fish wars between the state and Indian tribes. Over their 50-year friendship the tribes defended their treaty rights, won a landmark court case, created the Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission and united to save the salmon. *Laura Mott*

Hank Adams alongside his father, Louis, “the best Indian rider out of Montana.” *Hank Adams personal collection*

The year 1963 marked Adams’s major foray into Native activism. The newly minted special projects director for the National Indian Youth Council took on the struggle for Indian treaty rights on Northwest rivers.

In 1964, Adams refused to be inducted into the military, citing violations of Native treaty rights. (He later served for two years.) The activist organized the Indians’ historic protest at the State Capitol in 1964, famously luring Marlon Brando, the actor, to Olympia. Adams, the main architect of the tribes’ public relations strategy, understood the power of celebrity. He convinced Brando to fish and risk arrest. The strategy garnered media attention all over the country and brought the struggle for treaty rights into the American living room. In his autobiography, Brando recalls Adams and Indian fishermen “who didn’t give a dime about my movies.” After a miserable night in a drafty cabin before a scheduled demonstration, Brando told Adams he had pneumonia. “[A]nd he said, ‘You know what my grandmother used to say?’ And I thought, ‘My God. Finally some words of wisdom . . .’

‘If you smile, you’ll feel better.’”

The American Indian Women's Service League offers Seattle news media outlets to Hank Adams, above with Mike McCloud, Alison Bridges and Powhatan. The organization was founded to focus attention on issues facing urban Indians. *Hank Adams personal collection*

In 1968, Adams became executive director of Survival of the American Indian Association, an organization dedicated to the restoration of treaty fishing rights. Under Adams's leadership, Survival led the tribes' public relations and legal strategies. Adams, along with other Indian fishermen, was roughed up and shot at on the riverbank. In the winter of 1971, vigilantes approached the activist and another fisherman as they tended net near a railroad trestle that crosses the Puyallup River. Adams told police that one assailant shot him at point-blank range. "I can't identify him," Adams said of the gunman, "but hell, I've seen him before. In a thousand taverns, in a thousand churches, on a thousand juries." Police never arrested the attackers. Adams eventually sued, accusing authorities of depriving him of his civil rights, failing to aggressively investigate and spreading false rumors about the crime.

Without Adams's contributions, many contend, there would be no landmark court case, *U.S. v. Washington*. The so-called Boldt Decision upheld treaty fishing rights in usual and accustomed places. It secured the tribes' rights to an equal share of the harvestable catch. Most importantly, says Adams, it secured their authority to co-manage the resource. "When Hank came into the fishing rights struggle, the Indians were disheartened, disorganized and certainly demoralized," wrote the late Vine Deloria. "In the decade in which he has been active, the situation has completely reversed."

Early on, Adams acquired impressive credentials in American politics. He landed a plum job as an aide to Democrat Robert F. Kennedy provided the U.S. senator from New York carried the California Primary in 1968. Kennedy won but was assassinated moments after his victory. Adams ran for Congress himself twice, as a Democrat in '68 and a Republican in '72.

Adams sat on the national steering committee of the Poor People's Campaign for economic justice, and held the hand of its chairman, Martin Luther King Jr., as they sang "We Shall Overcome." Seventy-two hours later King was assassinated.

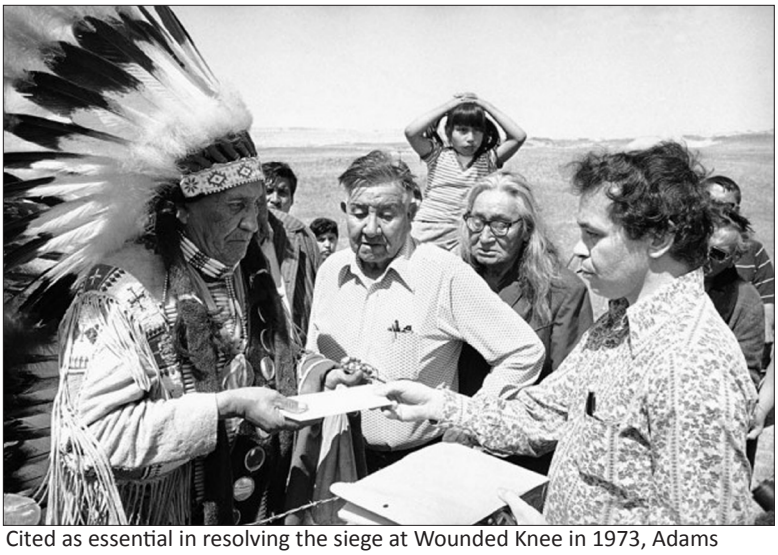
Flanked by civil rights leaders Mel Thom (NIYC), Ralph Abernathy and Reies Lopez Tijerina, Hank Adams marches in the nation's capitol during the historic Poor People's Campaign (PPC) in 1968. Abernathy succeeded Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as leader of the PPC after King's assassination. Tijerina is deemed one of the Four Horsemen of the Chicano Movement. *Center for Southwest Research, University of New Mexico*

At age 29, Adams led the West Coast arm of the Trail of Broken Treaties, a national crusade to reestablish the relationship between the tribes and the U.S. Adams wrote the trail's Twenty Point Proposal presented to the White House. The plan called on the federal government to, among other things, reopen treaty making. "It became a consensus paper and organizing tool for those who traveled to D.C. in 1972 on the Trail of Broken Treaties," writes friend Suzan Harjo in 2006. "Like most of the things he's written, the '20 Points' does not carry his name. I asked him once if he minded other people taking credit for his stuff and he said, 'But that's really not the point of it all, is it?'"

The tribes occupied the Bureau of Indian Affairs in November 1972 when the situation escalated. Despite 40 hours without sleep, Adams maintained his composure and helped negotiate an end to the takeover with the Nixon Administration. "Hank Adams was busily getting restraining orders against the government from coming in and attacking us," recalls Ramona Bennett, a Puyallup Indian. "It was terrifying. It was absolutely terrifying. We were barricaded in a building. The government had vowed to get us out by whatever their means might be." Adams faced charges of possessing stolen documents after the tribes removed a series of BIA records following the occupation. He was later recognized for his crucial role in the return of those records, and a federal grand jury refused to indict him.

At age 30, Adams was among those credited with resolving the 71-day siege at Wounded Knee, South Dakota. The conflict centered on tribal government corruption and U.S. Indian treaties.

Adams has since dedicated his life to Indian people all over the globe. In the 1980s, for example, he assisted the Miskito people who were fighting the Sandinista government of Nicaragua. He played a role in the negotiations of the U.S./Pacific Salmon Treaty. Adams helped to secure the Little Big Horn National Monument Indian Memorial. He regularly dedicates hours to the affairs of Indian people, working closely with writers, historians and students. Adams and Billy talk almost daily to restore the environment, create a world safe for salmon and protect Frank's Landing, the six acres at the heart of the fish wars in the 1960s.



Cited as essential in resolving the siege at Wounded Knee in 1973, Adams presents a letter from the White House to Sioux Chief Frank Fools Crow. *Hank Adams personal collection*

In 2006, *Indian Country Today* honored Adams with the American Indian Visionary Award. "For some reason I still don't fully understand, Adams is considered in certain quarters to be radical and threatening, perhaps because of his ability to empower other Native people with knowledge and awareness of Indian rights," writes Harjo in her tribute to Adams.

Now in his 60s, Adams has been called "the most important Indian" and a "mad genius"—a characterization he finds humorous. "I don't know which one is here with you now," he once joked to an audience of the schizophrenic label.

Adams is, by all accounts, a walking archive of Billy's life. He knows the voluminous family tree backward and forward. He spews dates, court cases, and relations like a machine gun firing away.

Adams once compiled a list of the five most fascinating people he's ever encountered, an esteemed group that includes Dr. King and the Kennedys. Where does Billy fall? After all, Adams is first to tell you about the Nisqually's historic contributions to the Boldt case, the Timber Fish and Wildlife Agreement, his work at the United Nations, and the relationships he has cultivated to bring the fish home and peace to Puget Sound. "If there's a category for best all around," Adams quips, "then I'd give him the jacket."

Trova Heffernan
2012