

# Alderville hosts Library Week launch

## Lieutenant-Governor pays a visit to mark the opening of First Nations Public Library Week

Feb. 12/03

by JOHN MILLER  
*The Independent*

A distinguished author dropped in to the Alderville library on Monday. But to the Mississaugas of Rice Lake, he was someone even more important: James Bartleman is a Chipewa and he happens to be the lieutenant-governor of Ontario.

Never in Eileen Simpson's wildest dreams did she imagine such a thing would ever happen.

Eight years ago, when she accepted a part-time job to run Alderville's library, there were only a few books in a dim room in the basement of the band office. "When you start at the bottom, there's only one way to go but up," she says.

Today she has built the collection up to nearly 3,000 volumes and moved into better quarters. And on Monday she represented all of Ontario's First Nation librarians in launching First Nations Public Library Week.

Guest of honour was Bartleman, named Ontario's first aboriginal lieutenant-governor 11 months ago. He presented Alderville Chief Randall Smoke with a copy of his autobiography, *Out of Muskoka*, published last year.

In return, local author Ruth Clarke

presented Bartleman and Ontario Minister of Culture David Tsubouchi with copies of *Before the Silence*, her history of the Alderville community.

And everyone, especially Bartleman and Tsubouchi, told stories about the importance of libraries in their lives.

A member of the Mnjikaning First Nation at Rama near Orillia, Bartleman said this was his first visit to Alderville, whose residents he described as "probably distant relatives." His mother came from Rama and his great grandmother from Georgina Island, so "we're all part of the same extended family."

He delighted more than 150 people attending the ceremony at the Community Centre by circling the gymnasium with band members doing a traditional dance to the sound of drumming. Following closely behind was his elderly aide-de-camp, his medals jangling as he shuffled from foot to foot.

Growing up in Port Carling with poor parents who had only Grade 4 educations, Bartleman discovered the world of books through his local public library. He read voraciously, progressing from "the backs of Corn Flakes boxes," to Little Orphan Annie comics, to Zane Grey west-



erns, to Tolstoy.

He joked that when he was a child he preferred "those nice nursery rhymes like Hansel and Gretel," rather than traditional native folklore, "those ones where some monster was going to come in the middle of the night and eat you."

"Reading allowed me to escape the discrimination of the village, and enter into another world," he said.

Native people have not enjoyed the same access to libraries as the rest of society, partly because they have an oral rather than a written tradition of story-telling, but mostly because there was no Andrew Carnegie to endow native libraries.

Natives were not considered part of Canadian society until 1960, when they won the right to vote, Bartleman said. Being the son of an Indian mother and a white father, he suffered the "injustice" of being denied Indian status until the law changed in 1985. "One of the biggest days of my life was when I got the status," he said. "Finally, after all

those years, I finally belonged somewhere."

First Nations Public Library Week encourages native people to "take control of their destiny themselves" and discover the key of reading and learning. He said there are 35,000 native people in university in Canada, who "have gained access to the key, and we need far, far more like them."

He and Tsubouchi, whose ministry funds libraries and supports First Nations Public Library Week, sat in rapt attention as Alderville teacher Melody Crowe led children in a ceremonial reading of Tomson Highway's *Dragon Fly Kites*. Similar readings of the book will be held this week at all of Ontario's 55 native libraries.

Tsubouchi, who said his Japanese-Canadian father lost everything when he was interned during the Second World War, said "libraries don't care what colour your skin is."

His family couldn't afford books, so he found his reading in the library

*Above, councillor Vincent Marsden of the Alderville First Nation speaks with Ontario Lieutenant-Governor James Bartleman during his visit to mark First Nations Public Library Week, on Monday.*

*At left, Bartleman meets Alderville librarian Eileen Simpson, who represented 55 native libraries participating in First Nations Public Library Week.*

John Miller photos



and made it a lifelong habit. Today, he has 10,000 books in his home, and brought a paper bag containing several of them as a donation to Alderville's library. "This has nothing to do with the Ontario government, they're from my wife and me," he told Eileen Simpson as he handed them over.