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Familiar Problems

A Talk With LaDonna Harris

Like Alaska's igloos, most stories of oil-rich Indians bear little semblance to reality.

MANY OF Oklahoma's more than 200,000 persons of Indian blood are poor — some desperately so — according to LaDonna Harris, who with her husband was touring Alaska as part of Vice President Hubert Humphrey's party.

Mrs. Harris is a Comanche and the wife of Oklahoma's Sen. Fred Harris.

She is also a motivating force behind Oklahomans for Indian Opportunity.

THIS UNIQUE organization has been in operation approximately two years. Its



LaDONNA HARRIS

aim — to push open doors for members of Oklahoma's 68 Indian tribes.

Federal and state programs designed to provide opportunities for advancement to the individual and the community abound in Oklahoma as elsewhere.

But, according to Mrs. Harris, Oklahoma's Indians were not participating in these programs to any great degree.

A HUMAN relations seminar at the University of Oklahoma underlined this lack of participation and Oklahomans for Indian Opportunity was set up as a non-profit corporation in an attempt to increase Indian involvement in such programs.

Membership is open to all Oklahomans who want to join.

Funded for the most part by the Office of Economic Opportunity, OIO is staffed by seven full-time and seven part-time employees.

SINCE AT least half of Oklahoma's Indian people live in cities, referral centers were set up in Tulsa and Oklahoma City.

OIO's program has many faces. It is designed to meet needs ranging from that of the small child to the elder. It strives to bring greater comprehension of the Indian, his heritage and his problems to the white man and aims at fostering a greater Indian pride in his past and present accomplishments.

Its referral centers aid the individual or tribe toward greater participation in existing state and federal benefit programs.

PROJECT PEACEPIPE — operated with the aid of the Bureau of Indian Affairs — recruited and provided five weeks of training for Peace Corps volunteers.

It aids young people in obtaining scholarships and provides on-job training for school dropouts.

Eastern Oklahoma — an area of pine-covered hills that has been mined and farmed near to exhaustion — is the state's poverty belt.

HERE LIVE at least 25 per cent of Oklahoma's Indians and a large Negro population.

"It's Oklahoma's Appalachia," is Senator Harris' description.

And like those who live in that well-known pocket of the poor, many eastern Oklahomans do not wish to leave their homes.

OIO HAS applied for an OEO grant to finance a two-year demonstration program for the eastern part of the state. It is hoped that new opportunities can be developed there and the people given a choice as to whether they will go or stay.

In Oklahoma — as in Alaska — there is a great need to develop the self-confidence of the native people.

Harris calls the Indian "a victim" of the native people.

In most cases, Harris feels, the white man is armor-plated by his confidence in himself. Not so with the Indians to whom the lightest rebuff can be "terribly damaging."

THE OKLAHOMAN senator and his wife find their fight against poverty in their state "exciting."

But they agree that the old concepts of how this problem should be met are not always valid.

Long-time agencies which have been less than successful in resolving problems of poverty in their areas on responsibility in the past must be re-examined, Harris declared.

THOSE AGENCIES which have become atrophied should be "shook around," the senator maintains.