

# What Unemployment? - Asked the Savage

By Donald MacDonald

This is the story of Tommie Jackson, Tinneh Athabaskan Indian of the Upper Copper River—an aborigine in a country where the older tribesmen still have their noses pierced for rings, where the bow and arrow is still used to save valuable ammunition. Nez Coy, which means The Questioner, was his Indian name, for Tommie was by way of being a philosopher and his method was the Socratic one—he asked questions.

I am an exploration engineer engaged in the reconnaissance preliminary to the location of railroads, roads, airplane fields. Tommie was my guide, companion and friend in his own wilderness. I found him to be a gentleman at all times, but a gentleman cursed with intellectual curiosity—a gentleman who asked questions, and that, as Socrates found out, is a cursed thing. Away up in this remote country he had taught himself to read and write with the aid of the occasional prospector and trapper. But alas for Tommie, he learned to read but had no background for the words. His primer read, "see the cow". But Tommie couldn't see the cow because he had never seen one. To him there "ain't no such animal". The book commented on apples, which I tried to describe to him as exalted blue berries, but Tommie refused to believe.

As Tommie progressed he developed a penchant for larger words—the bigger and stranger they looked the better. I was the interpreter. A lot of them were words I thought I knew very well, but when it came to explaining them to an unscratched mind I found out how little I really knew. For instance, he wanted to know what a Republican was, and a Democrat, and the difference between the two. Imagine that.

One day we were out blazing a trail. We had our lunch wrapped in a newspaper. When the newspaper was unwrapped it bore the flaming headline "Unemployment Crisis". The big word struck Tommie's eye immediately. "Huh" says

Tommie, "Skookum word." ("Skookum" in the Chinook Hudson Bay trade language means big, strong or good.) Then he spelled it out. "UNEMPLOYMENT. How you say him?" asked Tommie. "Unemployment" I said. Tommie repeated it after me. "Now what she mean?" "Well," said I, "Tommie, this is going to be a tough one. You brace yourself and I will try to tell you. Employment means work—unemployment means no work." "Huh", said Tommie, "Unemployment pretty good—all time me too much employment." "Tommie", said I, "White man think work very good—he fix it so almost everybody has to work. He says work very good for everybody." "Him crazy," said Tommie. "Huh! Caribou right here. I get him. Not much work. Caribou long way off, too much work, no get him. Everytime I sit down I think—maybe I go, but too much work, no go. No savvy me how white man think work good."

Apparently Tommie had a grasp of the basic fact of economics—that man seeks to satisfy his desires with the least exertion—more than most college graduates seem to know. "Well," I said, "Tommie, I told you this was going to be tough—but white man fix it so you have to work. He gives all the Caribou to one man, all the foxes to another man, all the fish to another man, all the trees to still another, and you have to pay \$5.00 before you can kill a Caribou or a fox, cut a tree or catch a fish. So then you have to work to get the \$5.00." "I know what I do," said Tommie, "I sit down." "Oh no Tommie, one man own all the sitting down places. You have to buy a place to sit down or pay so much every day. White man fix it so you have no place to sit down—you keep moving. Such men, without

place to sit down, who keep moving we call 'bums.' You heard that word at the trading post."

This thing of buying a place to sit down (a home) had Tommie completely flabbergasted. After considerable thought, mutterings and growlings in his own guttural tongue he burst out "How he get that way—one man own all the sitting down places, the trees, the Caribou—you tell me that." "Well", said I, "maybe so Government fix him that way." "Huh" said Tommie, "Me hear much about him, never see him. What does he look like?" I had to explain government. "Maybe so all same your Chief." "Our Chief," said Tommie, "He Chief to do us good—not bad—our Chief us bad we kill him quick. White man think unemployment bad damn fool him."

Many days Tommie Jackson Nez Coy worried over the white man's system. He saw men drive stakes to hold mining ground. He saw the trappers pre-empting his hunting grounds. He saw the terrible system coming. He asked me whether white men all thought it right to charge for sitting down places. So I told him the story of Henry George, and now there is a little Henry George Jackson on the Upper Copper River. But still the question came, and so the end. Tommie Jackson, the Questioner, killed himself. "He think too much," the other Indians said.