

## **The Cannonball Consult from the Perspective of the Kitchen**

Joan Knutson remembers in 2025

One of the most challenging situations I have ever been a part of was the Cannonball Consult on the Standing Rock Sioux Indian Reservation in December, 1976. The Institute of Cultural Affairs was launching the Human Development Project in Cannonball, North Dakota.

My husband, teenage son and I received the call that we were to be part of the set-up team. At the time, we lived in the Los Angeles House where the weather is perfect, and the sun always shines. Never mind that we planned to go to North Dakota in December where it is always dark, freezing and windy. "What an adventure!" Our excitement sent us borrowing a large camper from a colleague to use for the trip and for sleeping in the weeks we would be there. The camper provided space to carry lots of cold weather items and boxes of donated fruits and vegetables for the consult.

When the skeleton set-up crew assembled, we discovered that there was no allocated food money for us. The food money went to each ICA house/office and there were no separate allocations for special projects such as consults. There the ten of us sat, trying to keep warm and needing something to eat. We had the fruit we brought from California and donations of 100 lbs. of potatoes and 50 lbs. of dried beans. That was it.

About that time Bob Vance, our fearless leader of this endeavor, saw me. He walked over and gave me an enthusiastic and welcoming bear hug, "Are we ever glad to see you! Your assignment is to be the main cook."

I was given as workspace the rundown kitchen area of a former school building, now used as a community gathering space complete with a stage. This kitchen came equipped with one working stove, no refrigerator and a broken dishwasher. Having no refrigerator was no problem. I just put a sign "Refrigerator" on the back wall with shelves. Temperatures ranged so low everything stayed very cold. The dishwasher would have to wait until some of our more mechanically gifted colleagues arrived.

So, the first morning as the set-up team sat facing each other trying to get warm, I decided to speak: "Just imagine on this cold, cold morning with the wind howling around, imagine you have a hot cup of steaming coffee to warm your insides. Imagine on the plate in front of you is a beautiful, baked potato with melting pats of butter and some salt to make it more palatable. Remember the beans. Just think how wonderful they would taste with brown sugar and catchup. Just like Mama used to make." At the

end of the speech, I passed around a bowl to collect money to buy some of those things to get us through the week.

To begin, small teams were sent out around the state, telling the story of the consult, raising money, and “in-kinding” food donations and other items needed. My son served on a small team of young guys whose only job was to keep all the cars running day and night so they would not freeze. The plan was to launch the event with a community-wide dinner, inviting dignitaries and tribal leaders. The rest of the week we would work with the local people to build a comprehensive, bottom-up plan to rebuild the community.

The estimate for the beginning feast reached 400 people in the no-longer-useable school cafeteria. Now remember, I had one working stove, no refrigerator (except for the shelves on the back wall), very few baking pans and mixing bowls. Given that reality, I walked out into the community with a grid of the houses, knocked on doors asking if we could use their ovens to cook for the feast. I marked on the grid the ones who said yes. We were getting in-kind donations of roast beef for the feast. The project director, Jim Bell, insisted we must have the “symbolic venison” at the table. The local Sioux Indian people did not appear impressed; they wanted beef. Jim offered, as an incentive to the local men, \$1 for every deer they brought in time for cooking the feast.

We had enough fruit for a huge fruit salad but no container for it. When I was going door to door, I saw kids out sliding with big snow saucers. I bargained with one little boy, and he brought us his snow saucer before dinner. After a good scrubbing, it turned into a great container for the tossed fruit salad.

Local women made Indian Fry Bread for the whole group. We prepared vegetables and made a dessert that fed the 400 people on Sunday night in the old school cafeteria. The gathering had been a success by everyone’s standards.

It was late when everyone left. I looked at the wreckage and thought, “We have to clean all this up and serve breakfast to two hundred people in the morning.” About that time, one of our staff came up to me and said that there was a native man at the door wanting to speak to me. I went to see what he wanted. He reiterated that Mr. Bell had offered \$1 for each deer brought in and that he had 19 deer in his truck for us!

*What? . . . 19 deer!* I thought very carefully about the next words that came out of my mouth. I said, “Isn’t that just wonderful! We are so grateful to receive 19 deer. I am a little busy right now so could you come back in the morning. After breakfast, we can handle all this?” He said that would be fine. He decided to just leave the deer in the back of the truck, and they would freeze overnight.

One of the most popular items--constantly available in a large container--was hot spiced tea made with instant tea, orange-flavored Tang, powdered lemonade and spices. It

kept the troops going. Years later a colleague who remembered drinking that tea, asked for the recipe.

As the Cannonball kitchen team began running somewhat smoothly, a situation developed with a seriously chilling effect: the heater in the camper where my family slept ran out of fuel. Suddenly, I woke up in darkness with my teeth chattering and body shivering uncontrollably. As my husband and son worked on the heater, I yanked on another sweatshirt and thermal jacket. I grabbed my sleeping bag, stumbled through the snow into the old schoolhouse. Instinctively, I headed for the stage and the bright colored cold drink machine, beaming in the partial blackness. With only a small pulling away from the wall, the machine's whirling motor hummed a little more loudly with a toasty invitation. I threw the sleeping bag down, wiggled into the bag between the heated wall and the newly repositioned machine. Shivering eased. Slowly, my body seeped into a warm nest that held me close and renewed precious energies for the next day.

Two of my staff members were former native chefs and really knew how to fix venison. They made a variety of large and tasty venison dishes. But there was one little problem: the cooks were both alcoholics. So, my main job was keeping them sober and on their feet for two weeks. The last morning, we planned to serve a wonderful send-off breakfast and one of the chefs wanted to make Eggs Florentine. The night before, we prepared the ingredients. I got up early to ready everything, but my chef was not there. I walked to the men's dorm to find him. He and his friend had stayed up all night drinking and were passed out cold. Several of the men tried to rouse him to no avail. I finally walked into the men's dorm, squatted down by his bed and yelled into his ear, "If you can't get up, just tell me the damn recipe!" He did and I prepared that final breakfast.

Nothing accomplished in the Cannonball consult kitchen ever came easy. The same can be said for Cannonball, North Dakota. However, I am grateful to have been with these people as they created a contemporary vision for the future. What an unforgettable adventure!

Joan Knutson