

# Native Hero

Acclaimed journalist Paul DeMain, editor of a national Native American newspaper based in Hayward, risked his life by linking leaders of the American Indian Movement to several brutal killings.



BY DEBORAH KADES

Paul DeMain enjoys a lakeside moment near the modest offices of *News from Indian Country* on the Lac Courte Oreilles Reservation.

Photos of Paul DeMain by Rick Olivo  
Other photos courtesy of Paul DeMain/*News from Indian Country*

**P**AUL DEMAIN KNOWS WHAT IT FEELS LIKE to look down the barrel of an automatic rifle.

DeMain was a student reporter for the *UW–Eau Claire Spectator* in January 1975, when he headed to Gresham to cover a standoff between law enforcement and the Menominee Warrior Society, which had taken over an abandoned abbey and was demanding that it be returned to the tribe.

It was a heady time for a college student. The American Indian Movement had arrived on the scene, and the Oneida-Ojibwe student was thrust into the thick of things.

“I was lured to a cabin with several people,” remembers DeMain, 48, now editor of the biweekly *News from Indian Country*, one of the nation’s most respected Native American newspapers. The paper is based on the Lac Courte Oreilles reservation near Hayward.

“Suddenly I was all alone with this one guy and he pulled an AR-15 from under the couch. ‘Who are you?’ he demanded,” DeMain says. “Luckily I was staying with a prominent member of the tribe.”

That connection saved his life. He later learned that there had been a plan to kill him.

So perhaps it’s not surprising that DeMain has felt compelled to figure out exactly who put a bullet in the head of Anna Mae Pictou Aquash, the highest-

“My whole world was turned upside down” upon hearing the new evidence, DeMain recalls. “I was so nauseated I had to pull over to the side of the road a few times on the way home.”

ranking woman in the American Indian Movement (AIM), in December 1975.

In tracking down the assassin of Aquash, a 30-year-old mother of two at the time of her death, DeMain found evidence that her murder was ordered by the highest levels of AIM leadership—a charge that put him at the center of a raging debate over the meaning and legacy of the American Indian Movement, which flourished in the 1970s.

His work helped exact indictments of two former AIM members for the murder. Arlo Looking Cloud was convicted by a federal jury trial in February 2004. John Graham, the alleged triggerman, awaits a December extradition hearing in Canada as of this writing.

DeMain also uncovered evidence indicating that Leonard Peltier, one of AIM’s biggest heroes, indeed killed two FBI agents in 1975, an act he has been denying from his prison cell for nearly 30 years.

This work has brought DeMain accolades and awards. It has also drawn vicious criticism and thinly veiled threats on his life.



In late September 2001, DeMain headed south from La Courte Oreilles for a mysterious meeting near Denver. He brought along his son Michael, then 22, to stand guard outside the meeting room.

DeMain knew that this meeting would bring him face-to-face with some former AIM insiders, and he knew that the Aquash murder would be discussed. He did not know that this meeting would turn his world upside down.

In 1995, when DeMain began his investigation, Aquash’s death had been vaguely attributed to federal officials, perhaps FBI agents who had

been working to squelch the burgeoning movement.

Although Aquash was killed in early December 1975, her body wasn’t found until February 1976, when a farmer stumbled onto it in the remote Badlands that make up the bleak Pine Ridge Reservation in southwestern South Dakota. Through fingerprinting, the body was identified as that of Aquash, a Mi’kmaq who had come from Nova Scotia to join AIM.

An autopsy determined that she had been murdered by a single shot to the back of the head at close range. AIM pointed the finger at the FBI, while other rumors circulated that she had been murdered by AIM operatives. No one was charged for more than 25 years. DeMain chipped away at the story, slowly earning the trust of some members of AIM’s inner circle.

When DeMain left the nondescript motel outside Denver, he had breached

that inner circle and was shaken by what he had learned. Aquash was assassinated by AIM members, the very people she had been working to help.

“My whole world was turned upside down,” DeMain recalls. “I was so nauseated I had to pull over to the side of the road a few times on the way home.”

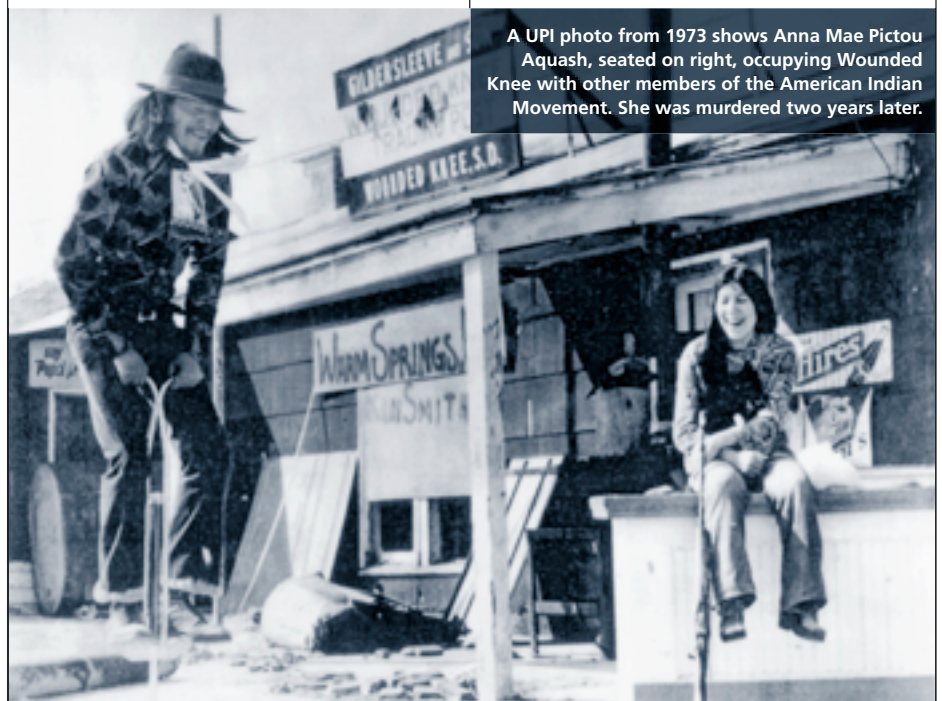
Some of his idols had been knocked off their pedestals, shattering at the impact of the truth.



From his modest offices on the wooded Lac Courte Oreilles Reservation, DeMain has patiently gathered evidence on Aquash’s murder as well as the highly publicized killing of two FBI agents on the Pine Ridge Reservation on June 26, 1975.

He has accumulated dozens of boxes of documents: FBI paperwork, court records, and transcripts of interviews with key players. As he collected enough evidence to document a given fact, he has published it in *News from Indian Country*.

Ask him a question about the murders, and DeMain, a tall man with long black hair pulled into a ponytail, jumps up and flips through the files to pull out



A UPI photo from 1973 shows Anna Mae Pictou Aquash, seated on right, occupying Wounded Knee with other members of the American Indian Movement. She was murdered two years later.

the pertinent court record or interview transcript.

Much of that evidence has brought him into direct conflict with parts of the Native community and some powerful voices on the American left.

Not only has DeMain placed Looking Cloud and Graham at Aquash's murder site, but he also has uncovered evidence suggesting that former AIM member Leonard Peltier killed two FBI agents in June 1975, a charge that Peltier denies. Since his conviction and imprisonment for the murders 28 years ago, Peltier has become a cause celebre among leftists around the world, with such notables as Robert Redford, Nelson Mandela, Peter Matthiessen, and Whoopi Goldberg crusading for his freedom.

For his work, DeMain has won two prestigious journalism awards. In 2002, his peers in the Native American Journalists Association presented him with the Wassaja Award, which is a special award for journalists who have shown courage in covering Indian Country, the term commonly used to describe the Native American people and lands.

"It's not given lightly," explains Sheila Reaves, a University of Wisconsin-Madison associate professor who has worked with DeMain. "It's generally for people who've risked their lives."

In addition, he holds a 2003 Paine Award for Ethics in Journalism granted by the University of Oregon. According to the award, DeMain was honored for "doggedly pursuing the truth, taking a courageous stand, and acting with integrity in the face of political pressures."

He is widely praised for his journalism by his peers in the Native American Journalists Association and Unity, a coalition of African American, Asian, and Hispanic journalists. He is a co-founder of both organizations.

Not everybody praises DeMain. "He's literally become the public relations hack for the FBI and the Justice Department," says Vernon Bellecourt, who heads the AIM office in Minneapolis. DeMain's work has implicated Bellecourt in the chain of com-

mand that resulted in the order to murder Aquash.

In the grip of the unfolding story of Aquash's murder, it's easy to forget that DeMain is still a workaday journalist, editor, and publisher. Twice every month, *News from Indian Country* goes into the mail to some 7,000 readers across Indian Country. He also edits and

publishes *Ojibwe Akiing*, a monthly newspaper covering the Great Lakes region, and he's diversifying his business on the Lac Courte Oreilles Reservation.



Pipe Mustache, an elder, has given DeMain an Indian name: Oshscabewis,

## Life on the Edge

Even on the remote and lushly wooded Lac Courte Oreilles Reservation, DeMain is conscious of the security risks he has taken by stirring up the ashes of Anna Mae Pictou Aquash, an Indian activist who was murdered in December 1975. In addition to some harsh criticism from American Indian Movement leaders, he has been warned that his life is in danger.

"He's a brave guy. When you get involved with certain issues in the Native American community, particularly issues around AIM and the criminal investigations stemming from those times in the early 1970s, you arouse a lot of people," says Doug George-Kanentiio, a Native American journalist.

DeMain put himself in danger by casting suspicion on the top leaders of AIM in the 1970s. "The orders to kill Annie Mae had to have come from the very top. Being Dennis Banks' lover .... would have kept anyone from taking her out without Dennis' go-ahead," DeMain says. Banks did not respond to requests to be interviewed for this article.

While the AIM principals are unlikely to harm anyone themselves, DeMain says he is concerned that their younger followers could.

DeMain realizes that some of his sources have taken enormous risks by talking to him. For that reason, he occasionally quotes unnamed sources. "I'm not about to do anything that compromises someone's life," he says. "I think it's essential for a free press to be able to assure the confidentiality of sources."

Some sources, including Ka-Mook Nichols-Ecoffey, former wife of AIM leader Dennis Banks, use only cell phones and have moved for security reasons.

His use of unnamed sources echoes Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein's Deep Throat, a key source in the Watergate scandal that brought down President Nixon. To this day, Deep Throat's identity remains secret.

DeMain uses only information that he has vetted with more than one source, and he does not publish rumors. And he uses unnamed sources sparingly. "I don't give confidentiality to letters to the editor or to critics of tribal governments," he says.

So, is DeMain's reporting accurate? Perhaps most tellingly, only one libel suit has been filed against DeMain and *News from Indian Country*, and it was withdrawn by the petitioner, Leonard Peltier, who is in Leavenworth prison for murdering two FBI agents in June 1975.

Peltier sued DeMain in May 2003 in response to an editor's note in the March 2003 issue of *News from Indian Country* that said that Peltier had been convicted of killing the two FBI agents and that one alleged motive for Aquash's murder was her knowledge of Peltier's guilt.

As more of the story comes to light, the security situation has begun to change.

"I think we feel safer now that Arlo's trial has taken place and so much is out in the open regarding Peltier," DeMain says, referring to Arlo Looking Cloud, who was convicted by a federal jury for Aquash's murder.

Nonetheless, DeMain remains wary. "In Minneapolis, I don't go under my name [at hotels] for security reasons. And I used an assumed name at the hotel I stayed in when I went to the Looking Cloud trial."

“It was my interest in journalism that got me reading and writing about Native affairs,” says DeMain, who was raised by non-Native adoptive parents. “They never tried to hide my identity,” he says.

which means “the messenger.” The name brings together DeMain’s two passions: Native America and journalism.

He became interested in journalism in high school in Wausau, where he was raised by non-Native adoptive parents.

“I grew up with some compassionate liberals who never tried to hide my identity and encouraged me to inquire about it,” DeMain says. In the early 1970s, he made official contact with the Oneida tribe.

DeMain’s identity as an Oneida-Ojibwe developed alongside his interest in writing as he learned the craft in high school and later at UW–Eau Claire. “It was my interest in journalism that got me reading and writing about Native affairs,” he says.

In 1978, he joined the *Lac Courte Oreilles Journal*, a tribally owned newspaper. Like many Native journalists who have criticized leaders, he was fired twice by tribal chairmen.

From 1982 through 1986, DeMain was appointed by Gov. Tony Earl to serve as the liaison with Wisconsin’s Indian nations. In 1986, he launched *News from Indian Country*, an independent newspaper that covers tribal politics, legal issues in Native and U.S. courts, reservation crime, education, and fine and popular Native arts. Over the years, DeMain spent time with elders and med-

icine men, learning both the customs and language of his ancestors.

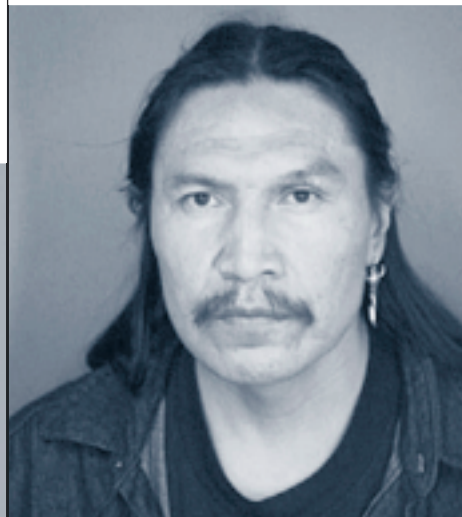
Today, he is honored by being seated on the Veteran’s Drum, the Chief’s Drum, and a Warriors’ Drum. He sings traditional music with the Lac Courte Oreilles Badgers.

He is also a businessman. Two years ago he put up a new building that houses offices, an Internet café, and a gift store offering works by local craftspeople and Indian books on the main floor. The spartan newsroom is in the exposed basement.

*News from Indian Country* employs about 12 people. To cover all of Indian Country, he relies on the Associated Press and Native news services plus the help of more than 30 freelance writers.

While he wrote a lot in the early years, he has focused more on management as the paper and related businesses have grown. He still edits and publishes both newspapers.

**Arlo Looking Cloud, below, was convicted of Aquash’s murder. John Graham, left, awaits an extradition hearing in Canada as of this writing.**



He and his wife, Karen, have six children ranging in age from 3 to 25. Their photos are taped on the wall over his corner desk along with treasured notes such as one from Wilma Mankiller, former chief of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma, praising his work.



To understand why DeMain’s work has stirred up so much emotion and reaction in Indian Country, you need to look back to the desolate yet majestic Pine Ridge Reservation.

The area first became a place of tragedy in the winter of 1890, when 300 unarmed Lakota women, children, and elders were massacred and dumped in a mass grave by U.S. cavalry at Wounded Knee, site of what is considered to have been the last official battle between white soldiers and Native Americans. For many, it is a name that stands for a long and bloody history of wrongs inflicted upon Native Americans by whites.

It was a fitting location, then, for an uprising that was to happen about 80 years later. Members of the American Indian Movement, which had been founded in Minneapolis in 1968, occupied Wounded Knee in a symbolic act inspired by the Civil Rights Movement. While the siege yielded no material rewards, it invigorated Native communities across the country.

The area remained politically volatile. More than 60 people were murdered on the Pine Ridge Reservation between 1972 and 1976 when tribal leaders carried on a private war against AIM and the Indians who had allied with them. A civil war raged on the reservation, fueled by FBI infiltrators.

The FBI’s success in infiltrating AIM with paid informants created an atmosphere of intense fear and suspicion, which culminated in the shooting deaths of two FBI agents, Jack Coler and Ron Williams, in June 1976, in a shootout with AIM members near Oglala.

About six months later, Aquash was executed. AIM has always linked her death to the FBI, but in 2003, U.S. authorities charged Looking Cloud and Graham

in her death. DeMain's investigations were key to those charges.



When DeMain started investigating the Aquash murder in 1995, he was inspired by the South African Truth Commission, which was set up to help heal the wounds of apartheid. "He'd talk about the Truth Commission and how Indian Country had so many wounds. For him, the biggest wound was the Anna Mae murder," says UW-Madison's Sheila Reaves. DeMain's ability to listen and his dedication to uncovering the truth, however disturbing, encouraged people to open up to him, Reaves notes.

And those qualities earned him the trust of Ka-Mook Nichols-Ecoffey, the common-law wife of AIM leader Dennis Banks. She had been privy to much of what had happened in the last months of Aquash's life—in a further link between them, Aquash had once been Dennis Banks' lover—and her testimony proved key both in DeMain's work and in convicting Looking Cloud for Aquash's murder.

DeMain knew he was getting close to the truth when he received a late-night visit from Nichols-Ecoffey in early 2001.

Nichols-Ecoffey had needed more than a decade to raise the four children she had with Banks and sort out her relationship with him. Eventually, she decided she needed to seek justice for her friend.

"She came just to talk to me. It's kind of an old Indian tradition," DeMain says. "She was trying to find out what kind of person I was." They didn't talk about Peltier or Aquash, but rather chatted about family and friends.

Nichols-Ecoffey was satisfied enough to tell DeMain that night that he was close to the truth.

"Paul is one of the few people I do trust," says Nichols-Ecoffey, who has moved numerous times to keep her family safe from AIM operatives. "I wanted him to know the truth about everything because he had worked hard on the stories he had written about Annie Mae and Leonard, and I felt he deserved to know everything."

Six months later, in Sept. 2001, DeMain was invited to meet with Nichols-Ecoffey and other AIM activists outside Denver. At that meeting, he learned that Peltier had reenacted the murder of the two FBI agents in the presence of both Nichols-Ecoffey and Aquash. Because Aquash was suspected to be an FBI informant, AIM leaders feared that she'd pass on this information.

DeMain suspects that there were multiple motives for her murder, including a sexist attitude among many AIM leaders and her knowledge of drug trafficking in AIM.

And Aquash may have known about the disappearance of Ray Robinson, a black activist from Alabama who came north to support the AIM siege at Wounded Knee. His body has never been found, but there has been talk that he was murdered by AIM supporters because of his opposition to armed resistance.

A photo of Robinson, a smiling young man, is taped on the wall over DeMain's desk. Its presence seems to be saying that what happened on the Pine Ridge Reservation isn't just an Indian concern.



DeMain's job is complicated by the fact that he works in Indian Country.

"There is no freedom of the press in Indian Country," says Doug George-Kanentio, an Akwesasne Mohawk and former editor. A founder of the Native American Journalists Association, he is a columnist for *News from Indian Country*.

While U.S. courts have ruled that First Amendment rights apply in Indian Country, there are no enforcement mechanisms there, he says. Indian nations maintain their own sovereignty, making for complex legal issues.

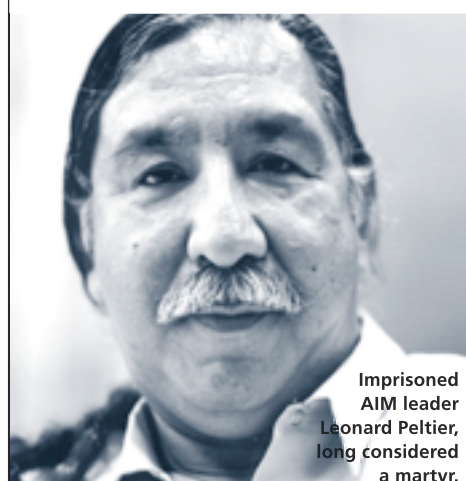
In addition, advertising dollars are scarce in Indian Country. "For the most part, the financial situation is rather tenuous," says George-Kanentio. "Most Indian communities are located in isolated areas so there aren't a lot of advertising revenues out there to sustain a publication."



Former AIM leader  
Dennis Banks.



Anna Mae Pictou Aquash and  
Ka-Mook Nichols-Ecoffey under arrest.



Imprisoned  
AIM leader  
Leonard Peltier,  
long considered  
a martyr.

As a result, only about a half-dozen Indian news publications across Indian Country are independently owned. Most are funded by tribal councils, an arrangement that works against press freedom. "Any tribal leader can act with impunity against journalists," George-Kanentio says.

Launching a national Indian newspaper from Wisconsin's North Woods

“Paul DeMain is one of the most fearless journalists in Indian Country,” says journalist and UW professor Patty Loew. “I have tremendous respect for him.”

required guts, Reaves says: “Just think of the distribution problems alone.”

But DeMain was determined from the start. “That first year he used to say, ‘Our newspaper’s being supported by advertising and pay cuts,’” Reaves recalls.

One reason he’s succeeded, Reaves says, is that he was quick to take advantage of the emerging desktop-publishing technology that significantly lowered the costs of publishing a newspaper. Today, the center of his newsroom is the modest iMac on his desk.



While the past exerts an inexorable pull on DeMain, he is grounded in the present, and he has his own ideas about where Indian Country should be headed. His belief in maintaining traditional ties is evident in his pride at being part of drum councils and in speaking of the elders he’s learned from.

But he also has an agenda for Indian Country’s future, particularly its economics. “Casino money needs to find a way back to the tribe and smaller entre-

preneurs,” he says, explaining that he opposes spending all gaming revenues on payments to individuals. He would like to see gaming money used to establish financial security for reservations.

In fact, he sees a hidden danger in gaming revenues. “I don’t want the tribal government to be too dependent on gambling. What if gambling money drops off? I just don’t think it’s going to increase forever. There’s only so much money out there,” he says.

That dual dedication to the past and the present has earned DeMain widespread respect.

“He’s very hardworking,” says former Wisconsin governor Tony Earl, who hired DeMain to be his liaison with the Native community during his governorship from 1982 to 1986. “He’s intense, but also a patient guy who can hear people out.”

Earl also commented on DeMain’s integrity. “He doesn’t shy away from something if he thinks he’s right,” he says.

“Paul DeMain is one of the most fearless journalists in Indian Country,” agrees Patty Loew, a broadcast journalist with Wisconsin Public Television and a professor of life sciences-communication at UW–Madison. “It’s one thing to take on government officials, but it’s quite another to poke at those issues that make Native people themselves extremely nervous, like the Anna Mae story. He’s writing the first draft of history in Indian Country. I have tremendous respect for him.” \*

DeMain served as former Wisconsin Gov. Tony Earl’s Native American community liaison.



*Deborah Kades is a freelance writer based in Madison. Formerly a business reporter for the **Wisconsin State Journal**, she has written for many Wisconsin publications.*