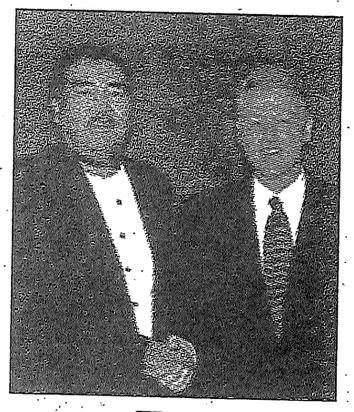
Harrison Talgo, Former Tribal Chairman

By Ed Kuehneman



Courtesy photo **Then-Chairman Talgo with Pres. Clinton**

Harrison Talgo was born in Bylas, the ninth of 21 children born to Oliver and Eunice Randall Talgo. His father had a farm up Goodwin Wash in the 30's and 40's, and by the 1950's Oliver was hauling watermelons and squash into Bylas. Oliver was seen as a tribal leader. He helped establish a Cattle Association when he was Vice Chairman in 1954.

"Beat me. Be the best," he told his boys, and to Harrison, that meant joining the Marines at age nineteen. He served eighteen months at Guntanamo Bay, six months at Da Nang, Vietnam, and six months aboard a helicopter carrier. He has always been patriotic: "God and Country!" With war protestors abounding, it would be over 20 years before citizens said they were grateful for his service.

He and Elouise Pike wrote letters to each other, and on leave, they got married in 1972. Elouise had taken over the raising of eight younger siblings, and Harrison became the instant dad of a big family. All eight are grown up and productive citizens now.

Harrison got a job with Swift Trail Prison, first as a detention officer, then in charge of the Food Service Administration. Accurate inventories and records were a must, and the experience would pay off later. Harrison chatted with inmate John Ehrlichman, former Nixon aide. "Joe Bananas" of Tucson was an inmate there.

For sixteen years, Harrison was a leader of the Lutheran Pioneers. They went on campouts like the Boy Scouts and stayed out of trouble. The group was "very effective," says Harrison. He doesn't see younger men stepping up to help the boys today (too much "self-interest"?).

Harrison worked in the tire shop at the Morenci mine. The tires cost $10,000 each and were huge. Then the historic Copper Strike of 1983 was big, long and nasty. Harrison returned to Bylas.

The Council made Harrison the Director of Head Start, and told him to "clean up this audit mess." The program was on probation, and many things had been bought without approval. Approvals needed to come from Washington, and Harrison would fly the midnight plane there, see officials all day, take the night plane home and work all the rest of the week. He did learn his way around Washington.

Harrison's Food Service experience in audit/inventory paid off. The books were straightened. In time, morale and community respect were restored. Harrison ran for Councilman from Bylas in 1986. "I thought I could help our community more." He got a Hatch Act waiver that allowed him to remain as Director of Head Start's parent Policy Council.

In 1993, the Tribal government was "in chaos, going nowhere." The Council removed the Chairman, and an interim Chairman served until there could be an election. Local people told Harrison, "You ought to run." Like Head Start, the office needed straightening. "I'll take that challenge," said Harrison.

Harrison was Tribal Chairman two years, and "teamwork cleaned up the mess."

He and supporters were in his carport, working on his re-election campaign materials, when six SUV's came up the drive. FBI agents had a search warrant for automatic weapons and computers. They went through the house, and, of course, found nothing. Word spread across the reservation:The FBI is investigating Harrison Talgo! He lost by three votes. Had someone given the FBI a silly tip to discredit Harrison? No one ever said.

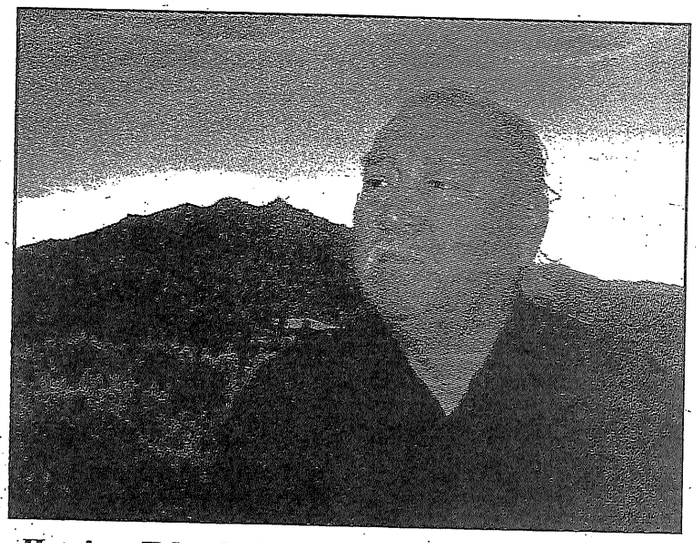
Later, Harrison was back on the Council representing Bylas. He served sixteen years in all.

He's semi-retired now, but does management consultant work when asked, and is always ready to "speak for the people."

"My issue's always been job development, opportunity..." says Harrison. "If you don't have a job, you fall to social ill, and it's sad. You see all your own age dying of alcohol or drugs. Babies are having babies, and the grandparents are raising them.

"Eighty per cent of the reservation is poverty level. To lead, you have to look at why - why are so many out of a job - instead fo pouring all that money into other things."

Busy for years, Harrison was "gone a lot," but he and Elouise enjoyed weekends in the mountains. They had four children of their own, three boys, and one daughter, Elina, who's in the computer department of a Valley hospital. She and her kids are "Urban Indians," says Harrison.



Harrison Talgo Sr. in Bylas today *Photo by Ed Kuehneman*

"Oak Flats" is just a political issue; the spiritual leaders are staying away from it, says Harrison. He remembers when two wealthy environmental clubs asked for Council support. The Council refused, but two members said, "We'll work with you."

Harrison says, " I have trouble with people who want to use my traditions to advance their own agenda."

A few weeks ago, he was asked to testify before the House Natural Resources Committee. He said, "The issue today is not about our reservation land, our sovereignty, our heritage, our self respect – these are not for sale. This is about putting our people – a lot of people – to work. I believe economic development should be our leadership's top priority. Because many members of the San Carlos Apache Nation are dependent on the tribal government for food, utilities, and a limited number of available jobs, they often do not speak out against Council decisions in fear of losing those benefits. I am not afraid to speak out.

"I can assure you I do not stand alone as a member of the San Carlos Apache Nation in support of the Resolution Copper Mine and the jobs and prosperity it will create. I made personal phone calls to many people within my community of 2,000 tribal members and the majority of them responded in favor of this project."

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