

Chief Dan George

Biography



Dan George was born “Teswano” on July 24, 1899, but his name was changed at age five when missionaries assimilated the culture of the Tseil-waututh (anglicized as Burrard Band) of the West Coast. Forced to attend a missionary school, he was also forbidden to speak his native language, and his tribe was moved south from their traditional lands to Vancouver’s Burrard Reserve #3.

Not your average success story, Chief Dan George stands alone as the only Hollywood icon in history to have been discovered as a 65-year-old bus driver. Prior to his acting career, George took whatever work he could find as a young man to support his wife and six children. Aside from being band chief, he took jobs as a longshoreman, construction worker, and school bus driver, and also travelled as the double bass player in his family’s musical group.

CBC was producing a series called Cariboo Country and, when the actor playing the major role of Ol’ Antoine fell ill, they needed a quick replacement. Bob, George’s oldest son, had a small spot on the show and, as the story goes, suggested they use a real native for the part and brought in his dad. He immediately brought the character to life, making him a driving force behind the series’ success.

His stage career took off when he met playwright George Ryga, where he was cast in the role of Rita Joe’s father in *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*. “In him I saw the classic symbol of Indian integrity. I felt that I understood his values...the sense of community...the continuity of life from generation to generation,” Ryga recalled.

When he played the part of Old Lodge Skins in *Little Big Man* (1970), a *New York Times* review cited: “He epitomizes all that is wise and earthy and noble in old age...This Indian will not vanish from your memory, and in the film it is the spirit of humanity that endures.” This performance earned him an Academy Award nomination and Golden Globe nomination, as well as the New York Film Critics Award and the National Society of Film Critics Award. He continued to act in films, such as *The Outlaw Josey Wales*, *Harry and Tonto*, and *Americathon*, and in the television miniseries *Centennial*.

In 1971, he was named an Officer of the Order of Canada. His positive attitude and notable success made him the ideal spokesperson for North America’s native populations. He remained at the Burrard Reserve #3 with his tribe until his death on September 23, 1981.