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## Personal Memories of Alcatraz, 1969

LUIS S. KEMNITZER

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One weakness that I have had as an anthropologist has been a failure to make plans for the possibility that someone might ask me details about my life twenty-five years later. I am in the habit of keeping my research (problem-oriented attention to important people doing important things) separate from my life (my day-to-day activities); so, even when I was in the midst of important historical events, I never thought that my part in them was worth describing for posterity. Thus, on this occasion of remembering and memorializing a watershed in the history of Native American survival and resistance, I have only a few random notes to help me organize my memory of my participation in the events of Alcatraz and before. Much was happening at that time, and I found myself willy-nilly in a position to be a small part of processes that I did not know would be as important as hindsight shows.

Actually, in order to get a good picture of the 1969 occupation of Alcatraz, we have to go back to the first occupation, in 1964, and follow the threads through the Third World Liberation Front strike at San Francisco State University (then College). When Alcatraz was decommissioned as a federal prison, the property entered into an administrative limbo that threatened to inspire lawyers and frustrate developers. Contemplation of this administrative limbo also inspired some Lakota residents in the Bay Area to examine documents relating to Lakota-U.S. government relations. Convinced that the wording in certain parts of the Great

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Sioux Treaty of 1868 and the Indian Allotment Act of 1887 supported their claims,<sup>1</sup> five Lakota men went to the island and formally staked their claims; after four hours, they returned to the mainland to pursue their legal cases.

The five men who staked their claims were Al “Chalk” Cottier, a house painter from Pine Ridge who had been in the Bay Area since 1952, Dick McKenzie from Rosebud, who was active in the urban Indian community, Garfield Spotted Elk, a twenty-six-year-old section hand on relocation, Walter Means, a retired traveling high iron worker who was helped in this endeavor by his son Russell, and Martin Firethunder Martinez, who had come to Oakland in the late 1950s on relocation and was a focal person in the urban Indian community. Cottier’s wife Belva did most of the legal research. At a meeting the next evening at the American Indian Center on 16th and Julian Street, the “homesteaders” said that, although they were staking the claims as individuals, as the law required, they actually had plans for a community center and a refuge and healing place for Indians, in addition to their private holdings. Although they offered to pay the U.S. government the highest price set for Indian land—forty-seven cents per acre—their case never went to court and ultimately was forgotten by a fickle public, if not by the Lakota and their friends, relatives, and associates.

The five homesteaders and their numerous friends staked their claims on Sunday, 8 March 1964, under the hostile eyes of the federal government representative on the island. On the same day, negotiators reported the end of a long sit-in at the Sheraton Palace that resulted in a nondiscriminatory hiring policy; the week before, Bob Satiacum (Puyallup) was arrested for exercising his treaty fishing rights in Washington State (San Francisco Episcopal Bishop J.A. Pike’s aide, John J. Yargan, and actor Marlon Brando were also arrested with him).

Fast-forward now to 1968, during the Third World Liberation Front strike at San Francisco State. A number of the faculty had been supporting the student strike and, in December of that year, went out on strike themselves. No American Indians were identified as participating in the strike or negotiations at this time, and no plans for a Native American Studies Department were part of the goals of the strike. However, a non-Indian graduate student in social science at San Francisco State who was tutoring young Indian children in the Mission district came to know a group of young Indians who also congregated at the place where the

student was tutoring. These young Indians had all had some contact with college and had come to San Francisco either on vocational training, relocation, or on their own; they had formed a group modeled after motorcycle clubs and wore "colors" that identified them as "Indians and Half Breeds of San Francisco." Conversation with the student tutor led them to become interested in the strike and in exploring the possibility of working toward a Native American Studies Department.

By the time the young Indians decided to work seriously toward these goals, the university and the Third World Liberation Front had started negotiations, and there was limited room for movement or expansion. The La Raza section agreed to represent the Indians in negotiations, and there was close collaboration between representatives of La Raza and the future Native American Studies students. I was one of the faculty members on strike, and, although I was not involved in the negotiations with the university administration, I was informally recruited by other striking faculty to help plan and negotiate with La Raza. There were no identified Indians among the faculty involved in these negotiations, but I, at least, had spent some time researching Indian issues in the San Francisco Bay Area and on Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota.

As a result of the strike, Richard Oakes, (Mohawk), Al Miller (Seminole), Gerald Sam (Round Valley), Joe Bill (Inuit), Deanna Francis (Malecite), Mickey Gemmill (Pit River), Robert Kaniatobe (Choctaw), Ronald Lickers (Seneca), Joyce Rice (Winnebago), and others were admitted to San Francisco State as the core student body of the Native American Studies Department (now called the American Indian Studies Department). Because of my role in the off-campus negotiations, these Indian students who were building and inventing the Native American Studies Department chose me to aid in this process and in the transition to Native American faculty. (As far as I know, there was only one Native American professor on the campus, in physiology.)

Richard Oakes was the major thinker and actor in this process. We had set up a community advisory board, including Jeanette Henry (Cherokee) and Rupert Costo (Cahuilla), well-known Indian intellectuals who had founded the American Indian Historical Society, and Belva Cottier, who had done most of the legal and historical research for the earlier Lakota landing on Alcatraz. As a non-Indian, I was spared most of the political maneuvering and conflict that accompanied the planning of the program and the

search for Native American faculty. I only faintly perceived the negative reaction from some of the principals, including native scholars who had been approached to participate, who perceived the program as “political,” “radical,” and “mixed blood.”

It was evident from the discussions we had during the formation of the Native American Studies Department that Oakes had a lot of respect for these people and that he listened to them. I also benefited from these discussions. Once, Oakes returned from a conference with Rupert Costo and Jeanette Henry and said to me, “You anthropologists just think of Indians as bugs, don’t you?” Immediately, I had to make explicit to myself as well as to him my perception of the relationship between anthropology and ethnic studies. This was something to the effect that, yes, anthropologists, as they are students of humans and human culture in all times and places and as they try to formulate generalizations about human culture and behavior, do think of Indians as “bugs,” just as they think of any and all cultures, societies and people, including the white middle class and the power elite, as examples of humanity to study. In the process of gaining information for their generalizations, they may well acquire knowledge and insights that can contribute to the aims of the particular ethnic studies discipline, and certainly their research should be guided by the needs and direction of the people they study. But the material is going to be interpreted and evaluated differently by those working in a panhuman context and those who are serving the consciousness and self-determination of a particular group. These ends are not mutually exclusive; in an atmosphere of mutual respect, they can be mutually beneficial. Since that time, I think these ideas have become givens, and the basis for much more sophisticated thinking. In 1969, we were still groping toward systematic statements if this kind and actions based on them.

These discussions around the founding documents went on during the spring and summer of 1969, and that fall semester we instituted the first class, Native American Studies 20, Native American Heritage, which I taught—nominally, because, again, there was no Native American faculty available at the time (this situation changed rapidly, much to my relief). We set up the class as a forum to talk about directions that the Native American Studies Department could possibly take and as a place where Native American students could examine the various traditional academic disciplines to discover what in their content and meth-

odology could be useful in the development of Native American studies as a discipline. On the first day of class, over one hundred students appeared. I passed around a sign-up sheet and told the students to write their names, tribal affiliations, and class levels on the list. Somebody asked what to write if they had no tribal affiliation; I answered that, in that case, they could not take the class, since it was for Indians only. The non-Indians left, and we set to work, all of us possessing vague ideas about what would constitute a curriculum and course content, and all of us wanting to use this course time to work on these questions. (A list of the members of the class is appended.)

A few weeks into the semester, Richard Oakes got word that the White Roots of Peace, an Iroquois Confederation group, was going to be in the area. Acting on his advice, I arranged for them to appear in my class, and I also arranged for appearances at Mills College, at UC Santa Cruz, where I had taught Native American studies courses, at UC Berkeley, I think, and also a public appearance at San Francisco State. White Roots of Peace had been traveling all over the country, appearing in Indian communities primarily, and their message was for Indian communities, not necessarily for non-Indians. Their influence on the American Indian students at UC Santa Cruz and San Francisco State was electrifying, to say the least. After their appearances at San Francisco State, Richard Oakes especially, but other Indian students as well, voiced a dissatisfaction with the structure of college education, with the enclosure in glass and concrete, and with the separation from the land and water and air of natural Indian environments. They said that the structure and content of white people's education was irrelevant to Indian experience and needs (I would like to think it was not just my class they were upset with, that they were taking other unsatisfying classes, too).

Richard Oakes and the cadre from San Francisco State were the main organizing influences. On an evening shortly after the first (9 November) occupation, I was at a meeting of friends of the Native American Studies Department at the home of John Connelly, professor of education. Belva Cottier was there, and she said that, as in the previous Sioux occupation, she was sworn to secrecy and could not talk about it before it happened. She had advised Richard Oakes and friends about how the Sioux had done it in 1964, and about the legal and historical research she had done and also the dreams and plans that the Sioux and their friends had developed to go with the claims. (In those days, people rarely

used the word *Lakota* when speaking English, generally referring to themselves as Sioux; *Lakota* was used when speaking Lakota.) She also said that she and the other elders who had helped the students in their plans were prevented from accompanying them on the landing and that she was disappointed and sad about that, although she understood why the young people wanted it that way. According to her, the young people said that the action was too dangerous to include the elderly people, and, besides, it was the job of the young people to do these actions, the job of old people to advise and support.

Native American students from other campuses also were involved in the planning and occupation of the island. Literally within hours after the first occupation, people from all over California and North America were responding to the action; more than eighty young people landed on Alcatraz early in the morning of 20 November 1969. But it is important that the crucial role of Native American students at San Francisco State be recognized in the Alcatraz affair, and I want to honor Belva Cottier and the other Lakota pioneers in this movement. My role was minor and peripheral. At the time, I thought the action was quixotic—a lot of energy expended for ephemeral and will-of-the-wisp goals. I had no idea that it would have the historical importance it did. (The week before, more than one hundred thousand people had marched in San Francisco to end the war in Vietnam.) Fortunately and naturally, I did not tell anybody this, since it was not my business to evaluate goals and strategy. I was, in some way, a faculty supporter for the Native American Studies Department, so I continued to support the students in an action that they understood better than I. Alcatraz was a very complex experience, and it touched and transformed many people. This is only one of many views.

## NOTES

1. Under the 1868 treaty, any male Sioux over the age of eighteen not living on a reservation can claim federal land “not used for special purposes.” This right was also granted to other Indians in the 1887 Indian Allotment Act. When the right was revoked in 1934, Sioux were specifically exempted. Claimants must make improvements worth two hundred dollars within three years.

APPENDIX

Class List, Fall 1969

Native American Studies 20, Native American Heritage

Barron, Gregory Mark  
Bill, Joseph [Inuit]  
Bright, Constance  
Charley, Dorothy Ann  
Francis, Deanna May [Malecite]  
Gates, Richard Russell  
Gemmill, Mickey L. [Pit River]  
George, Priscilla  
Greensfelder, Sara El  
Harden Ross  
Hodge, Gary Ray  
Jones, Kenneth Grover  
Justice, Mary A.  
Kaniatobe, Robert [Choctaw]  
Lee, Edith Teresa  
Lickers, Ronald N. [Seneca]  
Lind, Alessandra  
McKay, Peter Cameron  
Miller, Alan D. [Seminole]  
Oakes, Richard [Mohawk]  
Ow, Gale  
Rice, Joyce [Winnebago]  
Sam, Gerald [Round Valley]  
Shelton, Ferdinand  
Taylor, David  
Williams, Carol Ann  
Williams, Frank David [Costanoan]



