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Urban Indians and the Occupation of Alcatraz Island

ADAM (NORDWALL) FORTUNATE EAGLE

It was 1951 when my wife Bobbie and I moved to San Francisco with three hundred dollars in savings and all of our possessions in three suitcases. We rented a tiny apartment and set up house-keeping on the forty-eight dollars per week that I earned after taxes.

I endured the mindless racism of being called “chief” and “blanket-assed Indian” on the job, but a year later, at the age of twenty-one, I had passed the state test to become a licensed termite inspector. A decade later, I was vice president and general manager of a major East Bay termite exterminating firm.

Those early years in the Bay Area were a period of financial struggle and hard work, but I was on my way to becoming financially successful. In fact, by the late 1960s, I owned my own business, the First American Termite Company; employed fifteen people; lived in a comfortable, suburban house with Bobbie and our three children; and even drove a Cadillac. Nothing would have been easier than assimilating into middle-class America.

Not only was assimilation tempting, but it was encouraged in a society that preferred its Indians to be caricatures. There was no

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easy path “back to the blanket,” as it was termed, but, for my young family, there was reason—and need—to explore my heritage, and theirs. We took trips to the reservation at Red Lake or to Bobbie’s family home on the reservation in Nevada, but these trips were touring excursions among relics of something that was no longer a real and daily part of our lives. Perhaps we would have lost even that much of our past had the times not brought it back to us.

During the Korean War of 1950–53, San Francisco served as a hub for returning veterans, many of them Indians we had known from home or from Haskell Institute. We would see them passing through on their way back to a culture and a way of life that was still trivialized by urban Americans who wanted to treat Indians as souvenirs. In 1958, we began to notice a surge of young reservation Indians brought to the Bay Area under the federal relocation program.

Indians began to find each other, partially out of loneliness and confusion in their new urban surroundings and partially out of an urge to share a cultural identity. First came the picnics in Golden Gate Park that grew into drumming and singing sessions. These grew into a powwow circuit of social gatherings that, often unconsciously, made their own subtle political statement of cultural unity and affirmation.

So great was the hunger for powwows that we would gather even when it meant serving a white man’s need for a Hollywood version of Native America: the Indian Days powwow at San Jose’s Frontier Village amusement park. It was at that powwow that I first met Cy Williams and my life began to change dramatically. The powwow was open to all Indians, and, even if it served to entertain tourists and sightseers, it also filled our growing need for cultural expression. I outfitted my small son Addie with the head of a fox-fur stole I had found at a Goodwill store and suited myself in a turkey-feather approximation of something Chippewa, complete with little Christmas bells about one-third the size of those worn by traditional dancers.

When a mutual friend pointed me out to Cy as someone from his own tribe, I was doing my best in what I imagined then to be good traditional style. I realize now that my dancing was only a “tinkle, tinkle, tinkle” Hollywood imitation in Cy’s eyes. Nevertheless, we became lifelong friends and together stepped out onto a new road for urbanized Indians.

Cy and Aggie Williams were Chippewa people from the Cass Lake Reservation in Minnesota, located just fifty miles southeast

of my own reservation at Red Lake. Without intending to do so, Cy had become something of a success story for the relocation program. With BIA help, he worked as a machinist and continued to develop his skills. On the job, he also developed a wiry blue-collar grit, a rough-talking independence that always seemed to contrast with Aggie's frail, quiet humor. He and Aggie lived in a pin-neat cottage filled with Indian trinkets, curios, and knick-knacks.

Cy's old blue panel van was decorated the same way. Little buckskin dolls sat on the dashboard and decals of animals or Indian faces covered the back end. In later years, many other Indians like Cy would proudly display bumper stickers proclaiming, "I'm Chippewa and Proud of It" or "Custer Died for Your Sins," but, in those early years of the 1960s, Cy and Aggie were making a statement about themselves with all that was available: touristy trinkets. They were a link with home and a way for Cy to express what he felt like shouting.

"Ah, the hell with it," he would say in frequent frustration, throwing his arms across his chest as if he were tossing off a cur dog. The four of us spoke often about the problems faced by relocated Indians, and gradually Cy began to pass on to me some of his great knowledge of traditional dancing and our own culture. With Cy's and Aggie's help and advice, bit by bit I began to replace my fox fur and Christmas-bell imitations with the vibrant beadwork and stiff quills that are authentic and meaningful to our people.

Our neighbors in San Leandro would peer over the fence at us on evenings when Cy rehearsed me and six-year-old Addie in the finer points of traditional dancing. We worked hard as the heavy sleigh bells tied to our ankles chimed to the rhythm of tape-recorded drums and singing.

All over the Bay Area, picnics were growing into powwows almost every weekend. The government had certainly not intended or wanted such a resurgence of traditional gatherings. The relocation program had purposely scattered all its "clients" in the same rundown neighborhoods and slums, but never too near each other. The powwows in rented halls and public parks gradually expanded under the sponsorship of new Indian clubs. Some of them, such as the Sioux Club and the Navajo Club, formed around tribal identities; others, such as the Four Winds Club, focused on social objectives. Weekend powwows brought us all together; new drumming and singing groups were formed, news of home was

exchanged. All of it, I'm sure, caused the BIA great consternation.

Cy showed great patience with me and Addie as we learned his smooth, flowing approach to traditional dancing. But he had little tolerance for the sufferings of the increasing numbers of young people and families brought from the reservations. By 1961, Cy had become actively involved in a number of Indian activities, and he served on the board of directors of the newly established Intertribal Friendship House in Oakland, a project of the American Friends Service Committee. "These guys serving on the board," Cy told me with concern, "are mostly white people. A bunch of good-hearted Quakers who just don't know much about Indians. Shouldn't we be more involved in running our own activities? We have had white people telling us what to do and how to do it for too long now. They should be helping us run Indian programs, not directing us!"

I saw what was happening to the Indians in the Bay Area and compared it to "self-determination" for Indian people. I realized that Cy's words made good sense. "What do you want me to do?" I asked.

"Get involved. Help us. We need Indian leadership. You know how to get things done and that's what we need right now," said Cy, who had begun urging other Indians to get involved in the community. "There are a lot of Indian clubs forming right now, and maybe by working together we could do more good for our people."

We contacted all of the Indian groups that we could find in the East Bay; after several meetings at the Intertribal Friendship House, we decided to form an umbrella organization called the United Bay Area Council of American Indian Affairs, Inc. This was shortened to "United Council." The Pomo Club, Navajo Club, Haida-Tlingit Club, Chippewa Club, Ladies Club, United Paiutes, Four Winds Club, Intertribal Dancers, Haskell Alumni, Radio-Electronics Training School (R.E.T.S.), Sports Committee, Intertribal Friendship House, and American Indian Culture Group (San Quentin) were all affiliated with the new council.

The United Council was an Indian mini-version of the United Nations. Each affiliated group sent its own representatives to the council, and small name plates were placed in front of delegates during the meetings to indicate the groups they represented. Millie Barichello of the Creek tribe, representing the Haskell Alumni, was elected secretary-treasurer; Al Hicks, an elementary school teacher representing the Navajo Club, was elected vice-

chairman; and I was elected chairman.

The affiliated groups of the Bay Area were bound together by shared interests and shared concerns for the welfare of our people. Working together, we were able to help maintain a stable Indian community within the larger urban context. Each affiliated group maintained its own identity and conducted its own programs while, at the same time, exercising its voice in formulating larger community objectives. This collective voice gave the United Council its strength and direction. The wide variety of activities undertaken by the United Council would have seemed unrealistic to many experts in community affairs. Yet the diverse makeup of the Council allowed us to undertake a wide-ranging set of projects.

Most of our projects were designed to help the newly arrived relocatees overcome culture shock as they adapted to their new surroundings. The Intertribal Friendship House provided a setting for Thanksgiving dinner, Christmas parties, and a variety of ceremonial events, and most of the affiliated clubs held their meetings and social activities there. It served as the hub of the Indian activities in the East Bay, just as the Indian Center in San Francisco served the needs of that community.

The Bay Area Indian community continued to grow as Indians kept pouring into the area, and the United Council gradually took on a more activist orientation until finally, in 1969, it became the driving force behind the occupation of Alcatraz.

PLANS FOR THE OCCUPATION OF ALCATRAZ ISLAND

The United Council met every other Wednesday night at the Friendship House. We sat at folding banquet room tables arranged in a square that allowed equal space for each of the twenty or so delegates from affiliated clubs. "Indian time" or the demands of a family and a day's work sometimes kept us from starting at 7:30 p.m., but our professional careers and obligations gave our meetings a decorum worthy of any boardroom. Folding partitions that separated the dining room from the recreation hall could be opened to give us more space, which we began to need as our organized meetings became more like community gatherings of all interested Indians in the area. In some ways, the council meetings functioned like network news programs. They gathered information, shared it among the people, and allowed us to see what was going on in the country, specifically the steady attempt

to erase American Indian culture from America.

In 1968, when Alcatraz was declared surplus property to be given to the city of San Francisco, many of the members of the United Council remembered the 1964 Sioux action laying claim to "the Rock." The government had supposedly put that matter to rest in 1965 by concluding that the 1868 treaty with the Sioux applied only to federal lands taken from that tribe and then abandoned. The government said that Alcatraz had never belonged to the Sioux. If it had ever belonged to any Indians, it would have been California Indians, most of whom did not legally exist as tribes in the eyes of the U.S. government. Yet the Sioux action conceived by Richard McKenzie had been successful in what it set out to do: point out the government violations of the 1868 treaty and make symbols of them. The useless prison island now symbolized the contempt with which the government regarded native claims.

There it was, a dramatic outcropping right out in the middle of the bay. Every time you crossed the Golden Gate Bridge or the Bay Bridge, you saw that little spot in the water and remembered. Even at night, the revolving searchlight on the coast guard lighthouse beckoned to you. And you thought, "Those twenty acres and all those buildings, all empty, falling apart from neglect. And we have nothing."

Even so, when Alcatraz came up in United Council discussions, the talk was only tentative. We had a lot of other projects that occupied our time, our limited resources, and the talents of our people. Alcatraz and the future we envisioned for it only slowly came into focus.

Basically, our initial idea was to write a proposal for the use of Alcatraz by Indian people and then file the necessary application. If this would not work under the terms of the Sioux treaty, then we would try some other arrangement. We were not thinking of taking radical action; another surprise invasion and occupation was then still far from our minds. We were thinking of negotiating with the federal authorities to attempt to acquire Alcatraz peacefully. We did not even necessarily want the whole island; some portion of it would have been sufficient for a start. Essentially, the message would be this: There is an abandoned prison out there, sitting idle and falling apart. We have a need for it. Let us have it; let us use it.

Of course, we realized that some of the old prison buildings were clearly unsuitable for our purposes. But Alcatraz was a

powerful symbol, and we thought it had enough facilities to give it some real potential. We hoped that we could use that potential to galvanize the urban Indian community and reach out to the Indians on the reservations.

We asked for everyone's input and eventually started drawing up a formal plan to use Alcatraz as a cultural center, with a vocational training program, an Indian museum, and a spiritual facility. We did not submit the plan that first year, but over the next several months we refined it. Together we developed our ideas of the practical, historical, and political reasons why Alcatraz should become Indian, and what exactly we would do with it. All of our thoughts were later incorporated into the proclamation made at the takeover, but, for the present, our plan was simply to make a formal application to the federal government and await their answer.

Then, suddenly, two events shoved Alcatraz to the front burner. The first was a vote by the San Francisco board of supervisors in favor of preliminary plans submitted by Lamar Hunt, of the Texas Hunt family, for commercial development of Alcatraz. That came as a bombshell. There must have been stories in the papers about Hunt's plans, but somehow we had missed them. In fact, the first time we heard of his ideas was when the supervisors voted in their favor.

The implications were enormous. If Hunt's plans succeeded, the federal title to Alcatraz Island would be transferred to private developers. Hunt was reputed to be a billionaire, and he certainly had enough money to accomplish his Texas-size plans to build a huge apartment and restaurant complex on the grounds of the former prison. The whole thing was supposed to be some kind of giant monument to the space age. The idea was that, if the East had the Statue of Liberty, the West would have this space-age colossus, complete with an underground space museum. It all sounded very grandiose and unreal, but it was obviously real enough to impress the board of supervisors and start them dreaming of new tax revenues rolling in from what was then a white elephant.

But the board's vote was not yet the final word. Hunt's proposal agitated a lot of non-Indians who wanted to keep the bay free of commercial exploitation. The anti-Hunt forces ran a big ad in the local newspapers, complete with a coupon to be filled out by readers who were opposed to the project. According to the San Francisco papers, the supervisors were inundated with thousands of those coupons protesting the Hunt decision. Yet we had

no idea how powerful the commercial forces might be, and we realized that, if Hunt went much further, we could kiss our plans for an Indian cultural center good-bye.

A short time later, the second calamity befell the San Francisco Indian community. On 10 October 1969, the San Francisco Indian Center on Valencia Street burned down. No cause was ever discovered; it could have been accidental, or it could have been arson. Whatever caused it, the fire was an unmitigated disaster for the Indian people. The center had been a popular meeting place; an administrative center for all sorts of programs; and a place for social and educational activities, including powwows. People could socialize with others from their own tribe, find help with their problems, or just get off the streets. There was even a shop that sold Indian arts and crafts.

When the center went up in flames, Indian people throughout the Bay Area mourned it like a close and beloved friend. Everyone asked, "What now? Where do we go?" With outside help, a temporary location was soon established, but it was small and totally inadequate. Something had to be done, and fast. Alcatraz immediately came to mind.

With the loss of the Indian Center, the emphasis of the Alcatraz discussions shifted from leisurely negotiation to a desire for immediate action. For a year or more, we had batted the idea around, gradually moving toward what we considered a reasonable, if idealistic, proposal for federal transfer of Alcatraz to the Indian people. In early September 1969, we were still talking about proposals and applications. When we first heard about Hunt's grandiose plans, we realized that there was no way we could counter his proposal with just another proposal. He had money and political clout, and we had neither. To get anywhere, we would have to develop a different strategy. Then we were confronted with the emergency. There was no way that the people who had relied on the Indian Center would be satisfied with pie-in-the-sky ideas or the slow and unwieldy process of negotiation. They wanted action.

The United Council talked and argued and in the end came down to this: "Take it. Let's do it again, but this time let's do it with sufficient force, and in a way they can't stop. And this time, we'll not only take it, but we'll hold it. They won't be able to push us off."

Like distant smoke from a prairie fire, the idea and its potential attracted attention. Our meetings had grown into general gather-

ings of Indian people, especially since the federal “War on Poverty” had begun in 1964. The programs made no provisions for Indians and left many more frustrated than ever. More people flocked to our meetings. As 1969 stomped past midyear with riots in Berkeley and massive, electrifying antiwar protests in San Francisco, council meetings began to find focus and energy from the restless spirit of more and more young people, many of them college students.

In our enthusiasm, we sometimes forgot that Alcatraz was really a cold and desolate place, abandoned even as a prison. We forgot because at last we were daring to take back something of all that had been stolen; we would have one isolated place to renew what had been lost. That enthusiastic energy swirled through our meetings, and some on the council worried that we were being carried away by it and riding a dangerous tide of the times. Yet, when each person spoke around the table, the consensus was there: Alcatraz should be ours.

As chairman of the United Council, I was responsible for conducting the meetings that tentatively determined strategy, a date for the landing, and the wording of the proclamation. When we had made some preliminary plans, I called Don Patterson, a dapper-dressing Oklahoma native who had established his reputation as a southern drum singer while serving as chairman of the San Francisco Indian Center board of directors. On behalf of the United Council, I told him of a plan to replace their burned-out building with something bigger and better.

“What? Where?”

“Alcatraz.”

Patterson then invited me to come and lay out our plans for his board and members. They liked what they heard and agreed to support the occupation and the proclamation.

I next called the chairman of the San Francisco board of supervisors to tell him that Indian people did not approve of the plans for commercialization of Alcatraz. I told him we wanted the island to become an Indian cultural resource. I told him that his board should be pleased: We would end all the years of agonizing by white people over the fate of the abandoned federal prison. We would buy them out for twenty-four dollars in beads—exactly the same amount the Dutch paid the Indians for the island of Manhattan. This was clearly a bargain, since Manhattan is several times larger than Alcatraz.

There was an awkward silence on the line. San Francisco

politicians pride themselves on knowing the amalgam of ethnic ideals that make up their city and their region. Until then, I had usually been considered among the less threatening of the pressure group leaders.

"Uh, well, yeah, Adam. We could sure think about that," he replied.

Indian students at local colleges, especially San Francisco State, now began to get more involved in the planning. Up to that point, Indian youth had been only sporadically involved in our activities. The Indian students in the United Council had participated when they had time and when there was a discussion of issues that directly affected them or their institutions. But with Alcatraz as the catalyst, student input into the council increased by leaps and bounds, until many became actively involved.

Although many people were gung-ho for an Indian Alcatraz and any radical action necessary to achieve that goal, there were still voices of caution and concern. "Do you really think we ought to do something like that? Isn't it too big for us? Is it too hot to handle? What if it gets out of control? What if the federal government uses force? What if somebody gets killed?" Some people worried that an occupation would create more problems than it solved and that it might be too complex for our resources. But when each of us spoke around the table, the consensus was still there. Take the island.

We decided that Alcatraz would definitely replace the Indian Center and thus moved the planning sessions from the United Council meeting rooms to the temporary quarters of the San Francisco Indian Center. I was to be the council representative at these meetings, although I acted as the chairman of the crucial meeting when we made final decisions on the date of the invasion and the wording of the proclamation.

The interim quarters of the San Francisco Indian Center certainly met our needs. So different from the former center—a gloomy meeting hall inherited from some forgotten Masonic lodge—the temporary center was a ground-floor storefront in the Mission District. Huge show windows looked into a yawning, empty room the size of a five-and-dime. There were no chairs, but nobody seemed to mind standing. Those long, chilly meetings were warmed with bodies crowded into the unheated display room.

Some of the college students suggested waiting until Christmas to invade, in order to avoid disrupting classes and thus assure

greater student participation. I saw their point, but I knew that if we were going to do it at all, we had to move as soon as possible. We had to proceed before plans to exploit the island had gone any further and before the authorities could take steps to prevent any kind of landing. I also knew of some really big anti-Vietnam War rallies being planned for December. If they happened at the same time as our takeover, they would probably overshadow us in the media and thus ruin what we were trying to accomplish.

I proposed 9 November as the day of the invasion. That would not give us much lead time, but it also would not give the government a lot of time to snoop out our plans and throw us a curve. I pointed out that the news was so dull, the papers were reduced to printing boring stuff that would normally have landed in the wastebasket. "You know, it has to be a pretty slow time for news," I said, "for the media to be printing speeches by Spiro Agnew. We have to take advantage of that. We need to strike soon, the sooner the better, to get maximum exposure."

So we agreed that 9 November 1969 was Indian D-Day. The rest of our plans were still vague, because we realized we could only plan so far. We had many fine ideas and ideals, but we knew that many of our actions would be determined by reactions from the federal authorities. We had no way of knowing what those reactions might be, but, throughout all this preparation, the possibilities never left our minds.

We constantly stressed that this invasion would be peaceful, just like the Sioux invasion in 1964. *Nonviolent* was the overriding watchword—no violence, no liquor, and no drugs of any kind. We were going to be a positive example for Indian people and show a positive face to the world.

The question of who, or what group, would represent the Indian people had already been much discussed in our United Council meetings, and it was now an active topic of discussion at the chilly storefront in San Francisco. Everyone agreed that we wanted to promote a movement rather than any one individual or tribe; therefore, we wanted to find some designation that would proclaim our unity. The 1964 invasion had been an exclusively Sioux action because it took place under the terms of the Sioux Treaty of 1868, but this was different. Our protest involved people from many Indian nations. Tlingit, Iroquois, Blackfeet, Chippewa, Navajo, and virtually every other Native American tribe was represented among the thousands of Indians in the Bay Area. Finally, we agreed on a name we could use to structure the

occupying force and sign the proclamation: Indians of All Tribes. We then agreed that our proclamation should be a mixture of humor, serious intentions, and hope. But the humor should not be just the laughing kind; it should also have a sting.

Once these decisions were made, our preparations were squeezed into a very narrow timeframe. The center had burned down on 10 October. The landing on Alcatraz was set to take place less than a month later, on 9 November. During those few weeks, there would be a crucial discussion with a young student leader named Richard Oakes and an announcement to the media to prepare for something big in the Indian community.

THE MESSAGE

As we continued to discuss the proclamation, there was a flood of suggestions about what to include in this historic document. Many of the ideas were good ones, and the final proclamation reflected this involvement. But we had not yet learned that the media and the public have very short attention spans: If you want a message to sink in, it has to be short and to the point. However true or important the words might have been, most of the final proclamation never made it onto the air or into print. For the record, here it is:

To the Great White Father and All His People:

We, the native Americans, re-claim the land known as Alcatraz Island in the name of all American Indians by right of discovery. We wish to be fair and honorable in our dealing with Caucasian inhabitants of this land, and hereby offer the following treaty: We will purchase said Alcatraz Island for 24 dollars (\$24) in glass beads and red cloth, a precedent set by the white man's purchase of a similar island about 300 years ago. We know that \$24 in trade goods for these sixteen acres is more than was paid when Manhattan Island was sold, but we know that land values have risen over the years. Our offer of \$1.24 per acre is grater than the 47 cents per acre the white men are now paying the California Indians for their land. We will give to the inhabitants of this land a portion of that land for their own, to be held in trust by the American Indian Government—for as long as the sun shall rise and the rivers go down to the sea—to be administered by the Bureau of Caucasian Affairs (BCA). We will further guide the inhabit-

ants in the proper way of living. We will offer them our religion, our education, our life-ways, in order to help them achieve our level of civilization and thus raise them and all their white brothers up from their savage and unhappy state. We offer this treaty in good faith and wish to be fair and honorable in our dealing with all white men.

The "Bureau of Caucasian Affairs" was, of course, meant to be a dig at the Bureau of Indian Affairs, although, during the course of the occupation, the BCA became something entirely different from what we had in mind. In the next section of the document, we used gallows humor and a little tongue-in-cheek exaggeration to make some important points we wanted the government and the public to take to heart:

We feel that this so-called Alcatraz Island is more than suitable as an Indian Reservation, as determined by the white man's own standards. By this we mean that this place resembles most Indian reservations, in that:

1. It is isolated from modern facilities, and without adequate means of transportation.
2. It has no fresh running water.
3. The sanitation facilities are inadequate.
4. There are no oil or mineral rights.
5. There is no industry and so unemployment is very great.
6. There are no health care facilities.
7. The soil is rocky and non-productive and the land does not support game.
8. There are no educational facilities.
9. The population has always been held as prisoners and kept dependent upon others.

Further, it would be fitting and symbolic that ships from all over the world, entering the Golden Gate would first see Indian land, and thus be reminded of the true history of this nation. This tiny island would be a symbol of the great lands once ruled by free and noble Indians.

Then we got to the heart of the matter: the way we wanted to use Alcatraz if we could persuade the government to turn it over to us. There was nothing funny about this; it was all very straightforward. If, in retrospect, our idealism surpassed our sense of the possible, I think we can be forgiven. In those days, we really thought almost anything was possible if we just tried hard enough and got enough people on our side. If I felt some

gnawing doubts in the back of my mind, I sure did not let them bother me.

The most important thing was to establish the clear cut conflict between what Indians needed and the present plans for the exploitation of the island. We were partially successful; at least Alcatraz did not become some real estate speculator's private domain and source of fat profits. This section of the proclamation was entitled, "Use to Be Made of Alcatraz Island":

What use will we make of this land? Since the San Francisco Indian center burned down, there is no place for Indians to assemble. Therefore, we plan to develop on this island several Indian institutions:

1. A Center for Native American Studies will be developed which will train our young people in the best of our native cultural arts and sciences, as well as educate them in the skills and knowledge to improve the lives and spirits of all Indian peoples. Attached to this Center will be traveling universities, managed by Indians, which will go to the Indian Reservations in order to learn from the people the traditional values which are now absent for the Caucasian higher educational system.
2. An American Indian Spiritual Center will be developed which will practice our ancient tribal religious ceremonies and medicine. Our cultural arts will be featured and our young people trained in music, dance, and medicine.
3. An Indian Center of Ecology will be built which will train and support our young people in scientific research and practice in order to restore our lands and water to their pure and natural state. We will seek to depollute the air and the water of the Bay Area. We will seek to restore fish and animal life, and to revitalize sea life which has been threatened by the white man's way. Facilities will be developed to desalt sea water for human use.
4. A great Indian Training School will be developed to teach our peoples how to make a living in the world, improve our standards of living, and end hunger and unemployment among all our peoples. This training school will include a Center for Indian Arts and Crafts, and an Indian restaurant serving native foods and training Indians in culinary arts. This Center will display Indian arts and offer the Indian foods of all tribes

to the public, so that all may know of the beauty and spirit of the traditional Indian ways.

5. Some of the present buildings will be taken over to develop an American Indian Museum, which will depict our native foods and other cultural contributions we have given to all the world. Another part of the Museum will present some of the things the white man has given to the Indians, in return for the land and life he took: disease, alcohol, poverty, and cultural decimation (as symbolized by old tin cans, barbed wire, rubber tires, plastic containers, etc.) Part of the Museum will remain a dungeon, to symbolize both those Indian captives who were incarcerated for challenging white authority, and those who were imprisoned on reservations. The Museum will show the noble and the tragic events of Indian history, including the broken treaties, the documentary of the Trail of Tears, the Massacre of Wounded Knee, as well as the victory over Yellow-Hair Custer and his Army. In the name of all Indians, therefore, we re-claim this island for our Indian nations, for all these reasons. We feel this claim is just and proper, and that this land should rightfully be granted to us for as long as the rivers shall run and the sun shall shine.

The proclamation was signed with the words *Indians of All Tribes, November 1969, San Francisco, California.*

It seems we should have known that none of this would come to pass, no matter how much truth and justice we had on our side. For one thing, where would we get the money for all of these plans? Desalinization plants? Museums? And we were talking about tens of millions of dollars. All for Indians? Even then, in our heart of hearts, maybe we knew that Alcatraz would never be what we planned. Or maybe we felt that, if we expressed extravagant hopes and made extravagant demands, some part of them, however modest, might become a reality. Nothing could make things worse than they already were for Indian people. Besides, compared to what Indians have lost since the coming of white people, no demand for redress can be considered extravagant—unrealistic, perhaps, but not extravagant.

Once we had agreed on the action and the proclamation, we set about involving the media. We already had one good contact. Tim Findley, a young reporter for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, had become a friend of my family. (Later on, Tim even became our adopted son.) He had a strong interest in the urban Indian—

Indians were his “beat”—and he eventually covered the Alcatraz story from beginning to end. We told Tim that there was something coming down in the Indian community, something big and newsworthy. Could he suggest a way to announce it to the media? A press conference, perhaps? Would anyone besides him come to a press conference called by a bunch of Indians?

“It so happens I am giving a party for some media people at my house,” he said, “and that might be a good opportunity for you. I’m also thinking of inviting Richard Oakes and his wife, Ann, if that’s fine with you. But other than that, you and Bobbie will be the only Indian people there.”

This was a better opportunity than we had dared hope for. I accepted, of course. I felt that inviting Richard, an activist student leader at San Francisco State, was a great idea. It was also a lucky break for me, because I wanted to sound him out. I hoped to get him involved in something bigger than his Indian student group—something involving a large part of the Bay Area Indian community.

Yet I was really anxious about approaching Richard, a husky, handsome young Mohawk with a shock of thick black hair. Richard was of the younger generation, and Indian people felt some of the same alienation between the young and the old that white society felt in those days. Young Indians felt particularly removed from those of us who had moved into a more privileged economic status. I wanted to find out for myself what kind of leader Richard could be, and the best place to do that was away from other young activists who might expect him to be adversarial. I hoped the party would be the place. We were looking for somebody to lead the charge, but I wanted to feel sure that Richard was the right man.

Richard and I might have had comparable blue-collar backgrounds, but we seemed to be worlds apart. I was over forty at a time when the prevailing slogan was “never trust anyone over thirty.” I had been out of Indian school for more than twenty years and had become a well-off, independent businessman, with a nice house and an expensive car. Richard was a much younger man, an activist student leader who came from the dangerous and risky world of high steel. He was certainly much closer than I to the typical hand-to-mouth existence of minority students in California. In any event, we did have something in common to bridge the gulf between us: a deep concern with the Indian cause. We both believed in an Indian Alcatraz, at least then, and we were both

family men. Richard and his wife had five children, ranging in age from two to twelve, so we both had a big personal stake in the future.

When we arrived at the party at Tim Findley's house, I told Richard of our plans. He jumped at the idea and quickly responded, "Yeah, let's take it." "You going to lead the charge?" I asked. "Okay," he replied. That clinched it.

The decision to go ahead was now irreversible. We called Tim over and told him first, because he was our host and a reporter involved with the urban Indian story.

"Man," he exclaimed, "that's going to be one hell of a story."

Of course, he was not completely surprised. He knew there was something big in the works, something radical we had up our sleeves. He also knew that it had to do with Alcatraz. He had known all along what was happening at the United Council and the temporary Indian Center; we had talked about Alcatraz and its pros and cons for more than a year. As a reporter on a big city daily, especially a reporter with a strong interest in Indian activities, he wanted a real story as much as we wanted to stop being invisible. And this was one *real* story.

"No danger of that [invisibility]," Tim assured me. He pointed out that he was getting the full story at exactly the same time as his colleagues, some of whom certainly knew that something was bound to happen with Alcatraz sooner or later. He, like everyone else, would also have to observe restrictions on the story's release. Tim nodded to me: "Go ahead and make your speech."

Several reporters from the Bay Area papers and radio and television stations gathered around. I gave them a bit of the history of the Alcatraz action and then outlined our plans. I told them a proclamation of the Indian plans for Alcatraz was in the works. It was self-explanatory and would be handed out to them and read aloud on the day of the big event—9 November 1969—and not before. I warned them that, if any one of them broke the story in advance, there would be no story. Not one of them so much as hinted at the takeover before it happened.

Thus it was that the Bay Area media were tipped off to what we called the "takeover" and what later became known as the "Indian invasion of Alcatraz." This involvement paid off later. Since we supplied the media with some essential background beforehand, we got more complete coverage than many of us expected from the establishment media.

THE FIRST ATTEMPT

As D-Day approached, the meetings and telephone calls became increasingly urgent. The first order of business was to secure transportation. We contacted several charter boat outfits and told them only that we were a group of Indians planning an outing to Alcatraz and that we needed several good-sized boats. That was not a lie—we really were planning an “outing.” What we did not add was that not everyone who sailed to the island intended to return to the mainland. Five skippers agreed, and we were elated. Five boats were enough to transport the seventy-five Indian people who were eager to be in the first wave of occupants. Pier 39 was our point of embarkation, and we had notified the media accordingly.

The weather on Sunday morning, 9 November 1969 was beautiful and calm, just the kind of day we had hoped for. My family and I set out from our home in San Leandro. We had our tribal outfits packed and the twenty-four dollars in beads and colored cloth already arranged in a wooden bowl for the symbolic purchase of the island from the government. Feeling optimistic, we were soon on the Nimitz Freeway heading for Fisherman’s Wharf and Pier 39 in San Francisco. I began thinking that we were doing a pretty strange thing: Twentieth-century urban Indians who had gathered in tribal councils, student organizations, and clubs were now joining with concerned individuals from all over the Bay Area to launch an attack on a bastion of the United States government. Instead of riding horses and carrying bows, arrows, and rifles, we were riding in Fords, Chevys, and Plymouths and carrying only our proclamation and our determination to change federal policies that oppressed our people.

We were excited, but there was still room for tension and anxiety. I was worried about the media. Would we get decent coverage? And what if things went wrong? The media could subject us to public ridicule, something Indian people certainly did not need. Finally, I worried about the federal government. We had thought a lot about the government’s reaction to an Indian protest of this kind, but we could only speculate about what would be done to us. After all, Indian people had been killed for a lot less in the old days, and we had not seen much change in attitude or policy in recent times.

We were nearing Fisherman’s Wharf; smells of the delicious seafood for which the wharf is famous filled the air. As we pulled

up to the dock, we could see several Indians and a couple of television crews milling around. We were greeted by shouts of "Where the hell are the boats?" As calmly as possible I replied, "They are supposed to be over by the Harbor Tours dock. There should be about five of them."

"Nope. There ain't a damn thing there next to the wharf except the Harbor Tours boat. The bastards must've chickened out!" They certainly had. Everyone was worried and angry. Another worried voice exclaimed, "Jesus Christ! We've got to find ourselves a boat or we're in big trouble with the press; those guys will tear us up!"

I hurriedly parked the car and ran over to the growing group of Indian students. I asked them to keep everyone occupied any way they could while we went looking for another boat. Richard Oakes asked if they could read the proclamation; it would take a bit of time, and he felt the need for more participation by the students from San Francisco State. I handed him a copy.

Richard and his group set out for the end of the pier, the other Indians and the television crews following. The students settled down in a clearing of benches and planters, with Alcatraz Island as a hazy backdrop—a perfect setting for an outdoor press conference. The reporters took notes while several different Indians read the three main sections of the proclamation aloud. When they finished, we began singing and dancing so the media would have some action to tape.

Tim Findley approached me and asked if there was a problem; it was becoming apparent that we were stalling. I quickly explained our predicament. He felt that, if we did not get something started quickly, the whole thing would be treated as a joke, and we would be in big trouble. "You know, 'Indian time' and all that," Tim confided. I assured him we were very much aware of the problem, but we had the skippers' pledge of boats. I asked the whereabouts of the reporter from Reuters who had promised to show up. Tim pointed toward "the Rock." "See that boat sitting off to the side of Alcatraz? That's where he's at, along with a photographer and a television crew. They want to catch the actual landing. That's what I mean when I say you'll be in big trouble if this doesn't come off."

I left Tim to check on the boat. It was still tied to the dock, with no skipper in sight. This is no way to launch an attack, I thought, just too damn complicated. How much nicer in the old days! First there was a big powwow. Warriors prepared themselves for battle

by taking purifying sweat baths and then gathering their personal medicine to ward off enemy bullets or arrows. They made offerings and prayers to their protector before joining the war dance. Oh, the songs and dances were thrilling to behold; as the dancing went on, the tempo of the drum increased, and its sound grew louder and louder, adding to the fervor. Dancers acted out what they intended to do to the enemy.

I brought myself back to reality and wondered what our next move should be if the skipper did not show up at all—and it was becoming increasingly evident that this might be the case. As I stood on the wharf, I noticed a beautiful, three-masted barque named the *Monte Cristo* that looked as if it had come right out of the pages of maritime history. I watched the crew members go about their tasks under the observant eye of a handsome man with an air of authority. He had to be either the captain or the owner. From a distance, his tight pants, ruffled shirt, and long, blond hair made him look like Errol Flynn in an adventure movie. I later learned that his name was Ronald Craig, and he was the owner of the beautiful vessel.

Still wearing my full tribal dress, I approached him. He called over to me, "Hey, I'm curious. What's going on over there with all those Indians?" I did not hesitate for a minute, because I realized he could be our solution. I explained our predicament and pointed out the sizable media contingent that had now gathered. He gave it all a moment of thought. Then he started asking questions that showed concern and sympathy for Indian people and their problems. Finally I could hold back no longer and asked if he could take us to Alcatraz on his beautiful boat. He stood deliberating. He looked at the whole scene: a growing crowd of Indian men, women and children, all wearing different tribal outfits; the news media with their paraphernalia; the bystanders and tourists who waited out of curiosity for something to happen. He looked at his ship, then again at the Indians. I held my breath. Finally he spoke: "I'll do it on the condition that we get permission from the coast guard to put out to sea and that we take no more than fifty people aboard. The boat rides deep in the water because of the keel, so I can't land on the Alcatraz dock. We'll just circle the island a couple of times, if that's all right with you. Just a sort of sightseeing tour to get your message across, okay?"

Was it okay? Man alive! At this point, I was ready to accept a kayak, and he wanted to know if his offer was okay! I ran back to the wharf to share the good news. Worried looks quickly turned

into big smiles as word spread among the Indians, and here and there a whoop of joy went up from the crowd.

In a rush, we all converged on the *Monte Cristo*. In no time, her decks were awash with Indians, reporters, photographers, and even some of the curious bystanders who wanted to come along for whatever adventure lay ahead. But we quickly realized that we had far more than fifty people. Captain Craig approached me, shaking his head.

"We can't shove off with this many people aboard," he warned. "The coast guard will never let us cast off at this rate. "We took a head count and then started the unpleasant task of asking people to leave the boat. The media people had to stay, because without them much of our plans and efforts would be wasted. If nobody could read about our action or watch it on television, it might as well never happen. As somebody once said, If a tree falls in the forest and there's no one to hear it crash, does it make any sound? Besides, the media had shown exceptional patience and forbearance. So we considered safety and politely asked everyone who could not swim, especially the young children and the older people, to leave the boat.

We immediately felt sorry. The expressions of the elders told all too plainly the deep hurt they felt at being left behind. They had waited a lifetime for Indian people to assert themselves and reclaim their pride. They now stood in somber silence, some with misty eyes: Oh, to be young again and have the vigor and strength of the students!

There was one old Dakota Sioux who had told me earlier why he wanted so much to be part of this action. For him, he said, it would be a small revenge for what had happened to his people back in 1890 at Wounded Knee. During the massacre (the army called it a battle, but the Indians called it what it was, an unprovoked massacre of their men, women, and children), his father, then a small child, had huddled in his family's tepee while dozens of bullets splattered through its thin buffalo hide walls. His grandfather had gone out to call for peace, but he was shot down by the men of the Seventh Cavalry. His grandmother ran out to the side of her mortally wounded husband, and she, too, was killed; another soldier charging on horseback through the center of the camp ran a saber into her body.

I thought about that as I watched him slowly leave the *Monte Cristo* and return to the dock. He stood watching with clear disappointment on his face. Many elders left the boat in silence.

But the children were outraged at being left behind, and they loudly let us know their feelings in no uncertain terms. Yet orders were orders, and if we were ever going to push off from the dock, Captain Craig's request had to be honored.

When he had satisfied himself that there were about fifty people left aboard, he ordered the crew to cast off all the lines. The *Monte Cristo* had a small cannon mounted on the bow, and one of the crew set it off with a terrific blast. What a romantic gesture! The crew worked with well-trained precision, and we were soon underway. People on the dock waved and cheered, while amateur and professional photographers caught the symbolic moment.

What a strange turnabout of history, I thought. Here were nearly fifty Indians on an old sailing vessel, heading out to seek a new way of life for their people. I thought of the *Mayflower* and its crew of Pilgrims who had landed on our shores 350 years earlier. The history books say they were seeking new freedom for themselves and their children, freedom denied them in their homeland. It did not matter to them that Plymouth Rock already belonged to somebody else; that was not their concern. What did concern them was their own fate and their own hopes. What a sad commentary on this country that we, the original inhabitants, were forced to make a landing 350 years later on another rock, the rock called Alcatraz, to focus national attention on our struggle to regain that same basic freedom.

Yet we were in a festive mood as the *Monte Cristo* made its way across the bay to Alcatraz. Several Indians had set a large drum on the roof of the captain's quarters, and they were pounding the drum and singing war dance songs. Alcatraz loomed ever larger straight ahead, and the photographers were all over the place, trying to get Alcatraz and the Indians in their colorful dress into the same picture.

It felt wonderful to ride on that beautiful vessel, slicing through the water to the sound of the Indian drum and war songs, listening to the laughter and the excited chatter about what lay ahead. The boats on either side of us were loaded with the camera crews from several television stations and reporters from the local papers and the wire services-Associated Press, United Press International, and Reuters. Pleasure boats filled with curious onlookers joined the group and its celebratory spirit.

The *Monte Cristo* headed for the west side of Alcatraz. There was the prison, with its catwalks and huge walls topped with coiled barbed wire. The old guard towers, now silent and empty,

stood as grim sentinels of the island's famous and horrific past. As we drew closer, we could see that the steel ramps and catwalks had rusted from the corrosive salt air; they were buckled and broken into grotesque shapes. The empty machine shops and laundry facilities came into view as we rounded the northwest corner of the island. Abandoned and rusting equipment sat forlornly everywhere we looked. I thought of how beautiful the island must have been before white people came to it and left part of their culture and its ugliness.

My somber thoughts were suddenly interrupted by an unexpected drama on the ship: Richard Oakes had climbed onto the railing, stripped off his shirt, and plunged into the water, still wearing his boots! A cheer went up from the Indians as they jammed against the rail. One of the other students followed Richard into the frigid waters, and then another! Three Indians were swimming toward the island as hard and fast as they could before the captain had a chance to react. But react he did, and in no uncertain terms.

"What the hell are those guys doing, Adam?" he shouted to me.

"They're swimming to Alcatraz," I replied as calmly as possible.

"What the hell for?"

"To take the island for the Indian people."

"Jesus Christ, man," shouted Captain Craig, "don't you realize we are flying the Canadian flag? This could be considered an act of war! You've got to stop them!"

Somebody, probably a crew member, thrust a bullhorn at me. "Tell them that, by order of the captain, everybody has to stay put. No more jumping overboard." I could not argue with that; the captain is the boss on a ship. I pressed the trigger of the horn to make the announcement: "The captain has just instructed me to relay his orders. No more Indians are to jump overboard. It is the captain's orders. I am giving you his words: No more Indians are to jump overboard!"

The immediate response was a loud splash as another Indian took a flying leap over the side. Everyone cheered except an Eskimo named Joe Bill, who was wise to the ways of the sea. He stood shaking his head, saying, "No good, no good." We all began to see what Joe Bill had seen earlier: The tide was flowing in the wrong direction for the swimmers and sweeping them out to the Golden Gate instead of towards Alcatraz. As the ship continued toward the eastern side of Alcatraz the sweep of the tide grew

more favorable. Without another word to me, Joe Bill quickly stripped off his shirt and shoes. Just as the captain noticed and rushed towards him, Joe Bill plunged over the side.

The captain issued orders for the helmsman to swing wide of the island to discourage any more leaps into the water. The *Monte Cristo* made its final turn and headed back toward San Francisco. We had escaped a potential fiasco with the press and given hope to our people. But was this enough? I still had the bullhorn, and with it I called to the group, "Have we done enough?"

There was a loud chorus of "NO!"

"Do you want to go back and take Alcatraz? Really take it?"

"Yes! Let's go!" came the ready answer, with war whoops added for emphasis.

"All right," I answered. "When we get back to the wharf, spread the word that we'll meet at the Indian Center." Indian people of all ages and tribes were already jammed into the building when we arrived. Everyone was discussing the events of the day. We found the same consensus we had found on the *Monte Cristo*: Everyone wanted to go back that very night and land in force on the island.

NIGHT LANDING

Following the meeting at the Indian Center, I talked to the captain of a deep-sea fishing boat called the *New Vera II* that had just docked at the wharf; her crew were still washing down the deck. The captain agreed to take us out to the island if we guaranteed him a minimum payment of fifty dollars, or three dollars per person. Once again, we headed for Fisherman's Wharf, but the situation was different when we arrived in the growing dusk. There were no press people, no curious bystanders, no tourists, and only a small band of Indians. We walked with an air of secrecy past Castagnola's Restaurant, the boats lying waiting for repairs, and the reeking fish containers until we found the *New Vera II*. She was sitting almost out of sight across from Scoma's Restaurant, her deck still wet and glistening from her recent scrubbing.

The captain opened the throttle of the *New Vera II*, and we slipped out into the bay for the second time that day, but this time we slipped into the gathering darkness. Of the two hundred or so Indians who had been prepared to assault the island that sunny afternoon, there were no more than twenty-five of us on the

voyage of the *New Vera II*. It was all so beautiful it was difficult to tear ourselves away and direct our attention to Alcatraz. And what a contrast as we turned to face the island! We were just able to make out its gloomy silhouette against the lights of Richmond and Berkeley before the quick flash of the lighthouse beacon caught our eyes. The underwater cable warning sign glowed with a ghostly bluish light, and the mournful moan of the island's two foghorns were there to drive off evil spirits; or perhaps Alcatraz itself was the spirit—an evil spirit with a circling Cyclops eye and an awful voice sweeping across the waters.

As if to turn us from our goal, stormy weather completed the dismal picture. The tide was going out, thwarting the captain's attempts to sidle up to the large water barge at the Alcatraz dock. The riptide swirled around our boat, swinging us dangerously about; the lone light on the dock cast only useless, eerie shadows. We swung wide to avoid colliding with a barge, circled around, and headed for the boat slip where we had seen the custodian's boat. The captain revved the throttle to help push us into position, but the tide, the darkness, and the unfamiliar dock all kept him from making the landing.

The captain was already getting frustrated when a huge watchdog appeared out of the dark and ran up to our noisy boat, barking furiously. Would the caretaker hear the commotion and start shooting as the caretakers used to do when Alcatraz was still a prison? The captain did not want to stick around long enough to find out. He swung the wheel sharply and headed straight for the barge. Quickly we passed our sleeping bags and blankets to the dock and lined up anxiously to disembark.

"Hey, what's going on here?" demanded the skipper. I explained in an offhanded way, "Well, we are going to take over the island."

"Oh, my God," he exclaimed, "they might take my boat away for this!" The captain had been fighting to keep the nose of his vessel against the barge, but he now became completely agitated. Realizing that he could be charged with aiding and abetting our takeover and concerned with the rushing tides and the possibility of being shot any minute by a panicked caretaker, he suddenly threw the gears into reverse once again. The tie line snapped, knocking one of our men back into the boat.

"God damn it," the man hollered, "we aren't even unloaded yet!" But the captain paid no attention as he pushed the throttle wide open to get out of there. We were disappointed at being left

behind on the boat, but we could count fourteen Indians, a sizable contingent, on the shore of Alcatraz. One was Richard Oakes; three were women. They all flew up the stairway of the old fort and quickly disappeared into the darkness. The watchdog looked on with tail wagging. We joked that our fourteen friends had only two loaves of bread between them but that, if they got really hungry, they could always cook the dog.

The occupation of Alcatraz Island had become an accomplished fact. What an ironic twist of fate for an old prison island with a grim and sadistic past: In its heyday, desperate men went to any extreme, even certain death, to escape the island; in 1969, Indian people were just as desperate to get onto the island to seek their freedom.