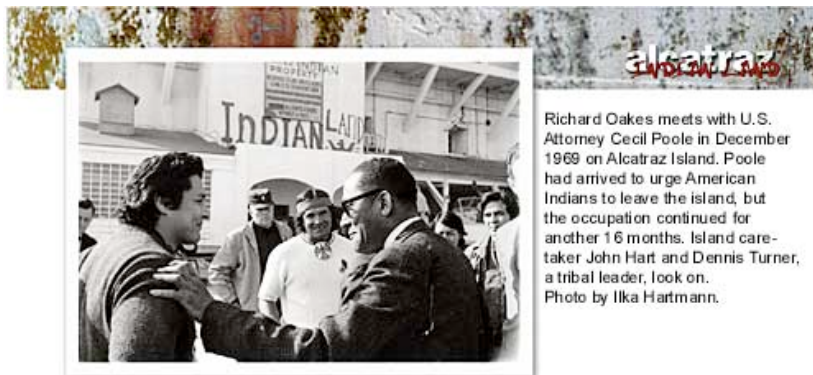




Native Peoples Magazine: Fall 1999 Article page #2, "Alcatraz, Indian Land" by Ben Winton



The beacon flashed incessantly. On. Off. On again. Like some sort of traffic light gone crazy, it pierced the nighttime mist over San Francisco Bay, sending a message from Ghirardelli Square to Alcatraz Island five miles away. There, cheers erupted as the light flashed the words, "Go Indians!"

It was the autumn of 1969. Thousands of American Indians occupied the abandoned remains of Alcatraz, the federal penitentiary that housed America's most notorious criminals until closing in 1963.

LaNada Boyer inside one of the Alcatraz guard barracks where occupiers lived from 1969-71. Much of the graffiti from 30 years ago remains throughout the island today. Photo by Linda Sue Scott.



The occupiers held the island for nearly eighteen

months, from Nov. 20, 1969, until June 11, 1971, reclaiming it as Indian land and demanding fairness and respect for Indian peoples. They were an unlikely mix of Indian college activists, families with children fresh off reservations and urban dwellers disenchanted with what they called the U.S. government's economic, social and political neglect. Since well before Modoc and Hopi leaders were held at Alcatraz in the late 1800s, U.S. policy toward Indians had worsened, despite repeated pleas from American Indian leaders to honor treaties and tribal sovereignty. The occupation of Alcatraz was about human rights, the occupiers said. It was an effort to restore the dignity of the more than 554 American Indian nations in the United States. Historians and other experts say the occupation-though chaotic and laced with tragedy-improved conditions for the 2 million American Indians and Alaska Natives alive today.

"Alcatraz was a big enough symbol that for the first time this century Indians were taken seriously," says Vine Deloria Jr., a University of Colorado-Boulder law professor, philosopher, author and historian.

Alcatraz changed everything.

WANTING TO CHANGE THE WORLD

LaNada Boyer, then LaNada Means, symbolized the festering discontent among the occupiers. As a child, she had bounced in and out of government boarding schools, often expelled for speaking out against the institutional conditions. At the University of California-Berkeley, she was once suspended for organizing a raucous student protest over the lack of ethnic sensitivity in academia. She was determined to change the world, and was among the first to set up an 18-month-long residence on Alcatraz, leaving it only for brief meetings in Washington and in Massachusetts with members of the Kennedy family.

Thirty years later, Boyer says the work begun at Alcatraz is only beginning. On a late July day, she sips iced tea at the Truck Inn on the outskirts of Reno, Nevada. She and her daughter Jessica are on their way back to Berkeley. LaNada, who received a doctorate this year in political science, has been asked to lecture at the school that once ousted her. Her daughter wants to enroll there in journalism school. Journalists, Jessica believes, can change the world.

Both agree that much work remains. They blame the legacy of European contact with American Indians for that. "We're all just remnants today, torn and scattered all over the place," LaNada Boyer says. That is why Alcatraz was so important, Boyer says-to rebuild Indian cultures and political alliances.

Boyer was one of many who felt that way. The charismatic and eloquent Richard Oakes, a Mohawk from New York, became the occupiers' spokesman. "We hold The Rock," Oakes proclaimed one day during one of many press conferences. His words became a motto for the occupation. Others included Luwana Quitiquit, a Pomo/Modoc from northern California; Millie Ketcheshawno (Mvskoke); Ed Castillo (Luiseño/ Cahuilla); Shirley Guevara (Mono); John Whitefox (Choctaw); and thousands of others.

Occupiers wanted more than just Alcatraz; they wanted to reclaim lives. They

made many demands. Among them was Boyer's \$299,424 grant proposal to turn Alcatraz into a cultural park and Indian social and education center. The federal government turned it down as too unrealistic. So the occupation continued.



A young John Trudell (seated) and other Alcatraz veterans announce at a June 1971 press conference U.S. Marshals were removing the last of the occupiers. Photo by Michelle Vignes.

GETTING THE GOVERNMENTS EAR

More than 5,600 American Indians joined the occupation-some for all eighteen months and some for just part of a day. American Indians, like many people of color in that era, were fed up with the status quo. The annual household income of an American Indian family was \$1,500-one-fourth the national average. Their life expectancy was 44 when other Americans could expect to reach 65.

It was the '60s: Cesar Chavez ignited Chicano farmworkers, sparking a Hispanic civil rights movement that led to better wages and an end to stereotypes. Malcolm X, Louis Farrakhan, the Black Panthers and the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. led civil rights movements among Blacks. Asian Americans in San Francisco also took to the streets, protesting discrimination in schools. Young White America protested the war in Vietnam and promoted a new culture of free-wheeling love and peaceful dissent.

Many American Indians also felt the time was ripe to speak out once again, for the first time in a century. Not since Crazy Horse, Geronimo, Seath'tl and Manuelito had American Indians so thoroughly gotten Washington's ear. They did so without violence. "We were going to be a positive example for Indian people and show a positive face to the world," Fortunate Eagle said. Representing dozens of Indian nations around North America, the occupiers called themselves Indians of All Tribes.

Earl Caldwell, then a reporter for the New York Times covering the Black movements, feared worse at the time. Caldwell was one of only two reporters on the scene of the 1968 assassination of King. Caldwell also had been covering the violent rise to prominence of the Black Panthers.



"I got the call from New York to stop covering the Black Panthers and go to Alcatraz," Caldwell recalls. Dread, he says, swept over him. "I didn't know what to expect, except perhaps the worst."

Alcatraz was different. Despite its chaos and factionalism, the event resulted in

major benefits for American Indians. Years later, Brad Patterson, a top aide to President Richard Nixon, cited at least ten major policy and law shifts. They include passage of the Indian Self Determination and Education Act, revision of the Johnson O'Malley Act to better educate Indians, passage of the Indian Financing Act, passage of the Indian Health Act and the creation of an Assistant Interior Secretary post for Indian Affairs. Mount Adams was returned to the Yakama Nation in Washington state, and 48,000 acres of the Sacred Blue Lake lands were returned to Taos Pueblo in New Mexico. During the occupation Nixon quietly signed papers rescinding Termination, a policy designed to end federal recognition of tribes.

The events that led to the occupation began when the government abandoned Alcatraz in 1963, making an open question of what would become of the island. On March 8, 1964, a small group of Sioux attempted to take the island, invoking the 1868 Treaty of Fort Laramie. The treaty promised the Sioux surplus federal land, but it was clear that the Sioux had no ancestral claims as far west as San Francisco. They lasted a few hours on the island, singing and drumming, before U.S. Marshals ushered them off peacefully. They had made their point, though, and the idea of reclaiming Alcatraz as Indian land stuck in the minds of many.

The U.S. policies of Relocation and Termination added to urban Indians' unrest. Under the Eisenhower Administration, the government launched an effort called Relocation to encourage American Indians to move away from tribal lands and into the cities, where the Bureau of Indian Affairs promised resettlement aid and job training. Relocates were given one-way bus tickets, but many found inadequate housing and went unemployed for months. Simultaneously, the government's Termination policy sought to end the federal recognition of tribes, effectively nullifying treaties made more than a century earlier with tribal nations.

Five years after the Sioux occupation, all this remained on the minds of Bay Area Indians. In October 1969, the San Francisco Indian Center, an anchor for displaced relocatees, had burned down. The Bay Area's Indians needed a new home. Attention began to focus, once again, on Alcatraz as Indian land.



"If you wanted to make it in America as an Indian, you had to become a hollow person and let them (the government and White American society) remold you.... Alcatraz put me back into my community and helped me remember who I am. It was a rekindling of the spirit."

**— John Trudell
(Santee Sioux)**

'ENEMY OF THE STATE'

Living on the Paiute-Shoshone Reservation in central Nevada's surreal mix of high desert and artificially lush farmland, Fortunate Eagle, now 70, revels in FBI records that he says label him an "enemy of the state." The files list him as a principal organizer of the occupation. Fortunate Eagle calls the label an "honor."

"Indian lands were being drained. Indians were marked for destruction so that the government could take over the lands and the coal, oil, uranium, timber and water on them," Fortunate Eagle says. He points to his wife's own reservation, where the government took 26,000 acres of Paiute-Shoshone land without reparation in order to transform the sage-ridden desert into irrigated farmland. Two decades later, the 6,000-member tribe has won a \$43 million settlement.

The U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs estimates that, from 1952 to 1967, 200,000 American Indians were lured to cities such as Denver, Chicago, New York, Los Angeles and San Francisco with the promise of a better life. The Indian Removal Act of 1830, in contrast, forced only 89,000 people off their ancestral lands.

Fortunate Eagle escaped Relocation, moving voluntarily from his Red Lake Chippewa home in Minnesota to be near his mother in the Bay Area. He expected to be drafted imminently into the Korean War. He never was, but stayed in San Francisco and launched his own business, the First American Termite Company. In doing so, Fortunate Eagle joined the Bay Area's middle-class. He was an urban Indian success, without the BIA's help.

Fortunate Eagle drove a Cadillac, but never forgot his roots. He helped create the United Bay Area Council of American Indian Affairs, Inc., which had set up the San Francisco Indian Center. Social gatherings were frequent and drew together a hodgepodge of displaced Navajos, Tlingits, Plains and other peoples in a place where they could support each other.

The center offered some solace, but by the late '60s many urban Indians were fed up with what they considered the BIA's false promises.



Children play on a walkway overlooking apartments that their American Indian parents took over on Alcatraz Island. Many of the occupiers brought their families hundreds of miles to live on the island.

SPIRITS REBORN

In San Bernardino, California, John Trudell was among them. He considered himself a college dropout in 1969, staying in school just enough to collect on the GI Bill. Trudell—a singer, songwriter, actor and activist—felt the downward pull of political, emotional and cultural stagnation in the Native American community.

"If you wanted to make it in America as an Indian, you had to become a hollow person and let them (the government and White American society) remold you," says Trudell, a Santee Sioux. He felt he had begun to fall into the mold—and then Alcatraz happened. "Alcatraz put me back into my community and helped me remember who I am. It was a rekindling of the spirit. Alcatraz made it easier for us to remember who we are."

When he heard about the occupation, Trudell, then 23, packed a sleeping bag and headed to San Francisco. He became the voice of Radio Free Alcatraz, a pirate station that broadcast from the island with the help of local stations. When he hit the airwaves, the response was often overwhelming. Boxes of food and money poured in from everywhere—from rock groups such as The Grateful Dead and Creedence Clearwater Revival (who staged a concert on a boat off Alcatraz and then donated the boat), Jane Fonda, Marlon Brando, city politicians and everyday folks.

Trudell and his wife, Lou, had the only baby born on the island during the occupation. The couple hailed their new son as a symbolic rebirth of an earlier Indian movement. They named him Wovoka, after the 19th-century Paiute who introduced the Ghost Dance and the prophecy that North America would be returned to Indians.

In 1969, Ketcheshawno also was among the disenchanting. A graduate of the Haskell Boarding School in Kansas, Ketcheshawno arrived in San Francisco a decade earlier. She was 21 in 1958, newly trained in "commercial procedures:" typing, shorthand and use of the Dictaphone. Fourteen former classmates came with her to California. It was their first time living off a reservation. They spent their first few months jobless and lost. "There were always seven or eight of us that traveled the city together for protection and support—like a mother hen and a bunch of chicks," she says.

Ketcheshawno eventually became an office worker, but her heart sought social work. She met Fortunate Eagle in the early 1960s and began working with him and others to set up Indian social service programs.



Much of the Alcatraz graffiti turned the tables on history with phrases carrying bitter irony. Photos by Michelle Vignes.

On October 10, 1969, when the Indian Center burned down, social work had been evolving into Indian activism. Protests at college campuses were becoming more frequent. Coincidentally that year, the San Francisco City Council had been entertaining all sorts of



proposals for Alcatraz. Among them was one drafted by Fortunate Eagle, Ketcheshawno and others to turn Alcatraz into an American Indian center. After the fire, the proposal became urgent. But controversy over Texas millionaire Lamar Hunt's desire to turn Alcatraz into a commercial venue overshadowed the proposal.

With no options left, "we all decided November 9 would be the day we would all go out and just stay until they gave us the island," Ketcheshawno says.

Meanwhile, Oakes and other college students also had been thinking about taking the island. Oakes and Fortunate Eagle, who knew of each other, met for the first time at the home of San Francisco Chronicle reporter Tim Findley for a Halloween party in 1969. Findley, a former VISTA worker, had a penchant for throwing parties that mixed together people who otherwise would never hang out together, such as journalists and politicians, middle-class businessmen and college activists.

The pair led an ill-fated attempt on Alcatraz on November 9, 1969. Nearly a hundred Bay Area Indians showed up at Pier 39, prepared to take the island. Only, the boats failed to show up. Oakes and others took turns reading a lengthy proclamation, which claimed Alcatraz by right of "discovery" and offered to buy it for \$24 in glass beads and red cloth. Meanwhile, Fortunate Eagle, in full traditional regalia, rounded up a Canadian sailboat, the Monte Cristo. Its skipper, Ronald Craig, agreed to take seventy-five on a symbolic cruise around the island. Halfway through the cruise, an impatient Oakes peeled off his shirt and shouted, "Let's get it on!" Then, Oakes dove overboard, followed by several others. Craig pulled away to thwart more jumpers. The tide pulled the swimmers away from the island, and the Coast Guard had to rescue them from the frigid, choppy waters. Joe Bill, an Alaska Native familiar with the sea, waited until the boat reached the opposite side of the island. Then he dove overboard, letting the tide pull him ashore. The Coast Guard plucked Bill off the rocky beach.

That same night, fourteen of the activists, still reveling in the day's excitement, persuaded local fishermen to take them back to the island, according to Boyer. They spent the night on the island. Fortunate Eagle and a handful of others, who say that they had ridden on the boat to the island, returned to the mainland rather than stay. The caretaker returned the next day to find the fourteen romping with his fierce-looking, but surprisingly friendly, guard dog. The Coast Guard delivered them to stern-faced U.S. Marshals at the pier.

But none were prosecuted. "The fact was, everybody was going out of their way for them," said Findley, who not only covered the occupation, but helped it along by rounding up boats for the successful invasion later that month. "Everyone wanted to see them succeed."

After the fiascos of Nov. 9, the college students distanced themselves from Fortunate Eagle, determined to do things their own way.

The real invasion took place on November 20, 1969. At about 2 a.m., nearly eighty American Indians from more than twenty tribes pulled up to the island's eastern shore in three boats that Findley had secured through his friend Peter Bowman, of

the No Name Bar. The bar was a local hangout for journalists and other so-called "intellectuals," and Bowman agreed to take the Indians to the island after he got off work after midnight. Findley rode over with them to cover the landing. When they stepped ashore, the group's noisy cheers awakened Alcatraz's only caretaker, Glenn Dodson, who-claiming to be one-eighth Cherokee-offered them the deserted three-story warden's residence.

On November 20, Fortunate Eagle was attending an Indian education conference out of town. Boyer says that date was chosen because Fortunate Eagle would be away. She said the college students had always been distrustful of Fortunate Eagle because of his age and his middle-class status in the White man's world.

Unfazed by their distrust and the political divisions, Fortunate Eagle, who never lived on the island, continued working on the mainland on behalf of the cause-drumming up food, money and political support for the island's occupants.

"Look at it from my perspective," Fortunate Eagle says today. "I had a lot more to lose (than college students did) back then. I had a family, a house, a business. And, yet, I stuck with it." Alcatraz had become a powerful political symbol of the need for Indian self-determination, and Fortunate Eagle and the others were determined in their own separate ways to keep the symbol alive.

Many who lived on the island described life there as near anarchy, as numerous factions tried to carve out their own versions of Indian utopia. Others saw the occupation as an escape from life and held constant parties fueled by drugs and alcohol smuggled past the volunteer security force.

On January 3, 1970, Oakes' 12-year-old daughter Yvonne died in a three-story fall inside the warden's house. Oakes soon left Alcatraz amid criticism that the island's own system of government had gotten too lax. A council of island residents, including Boyer and Oakes, made many of the decisions. But power struggles were common, according to many of the veterans; free speech and dissent were strongly encouraged.

(A few years later, Oakes died tragically when a YMCA camp security guard shot him during an argument involving some Indian youths. Oakes had intervened, trying to settle the argument, when the guard-who said he suspected Oakes was reaching for a gun in his jacket-shot Oakes, according to various sources.)



After the forced removal from Alcatraz, Atha Whitemankiller delivered a strong speech in defense of the occupation at a press conference at San Francisco's Senator Hotel. Exhausted and demoralized, he slumped to his chair afterward and mourned what could have been.
Photo by Ilka Hartmann.

By the final two weeks of the occupation, the Indians of Alcatraz had gotten little of what they had demanded, especially the island itself. Although, a leading faction turned down an offer to take control of nearby Fort Mason in exchange for leaving Alcatraz. Following that refusal, frustrated White House officials were determined to get the Indians off the island at almost any cost. Some officials even proposed an armed invasion. Nixon aides quickly dismissed the latter as too damaging to Republicans.

A fire, not political unrest, signaled the end of the occupation. On June 1, 1971, four historical buildings on the island went up in flames. Because the buildings were far apart from each other, occupiers concluded that government agents had set the fires to discredit the occupation. Government leaders shot back that rowdy occupiers had set the fires.

Officials increased calls to remove the occupiers. Alcatraz, one said, had become an "island ghetto."

Most of the occupiers began to leave on their own, anxious to return to schools and jobs. Only fourteen remained on June 11, 1971, when U.S. Marshals in three-piece suits arrived to reclaim the island. After the occupation, Trudell became one of the American Indian Movement's most vocal and militant leaders, helping organize the February 1973 armed occupation of Wounded Knee, South Dakota, and the takeover of BIA headquarters in Washington, D.C.

Since then, he has mellowed considerably. Of the AIM activities, Trudell says, "We would have been better saying, 'We're Native and humble,' rather than, 'We're Native and militant.' Genocide often is a result of out-of-control pride and militancy."

Like Trudell, Wilma Mankiller emerged to prominence out of Alcatraz. She became principal chief of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma in the 1980s and one of the most powerful and popular American Indian leaders this century. In 1969, Mankiller was a 23-year-old Bay Area housewife when she visited the island. Mankiller says

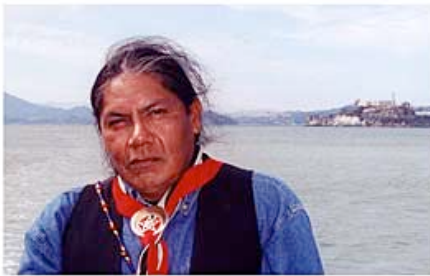
that the occupation "gave me the sense that anything was possible."

"It was idealistic, and the generosity of the spirit of the people proved that we could change anything. Who I am and how I governed was influenced by Alcatraz. The way I viewed dissent was totally influenced by Alcatraz. People on the island were very strong about freedom of speech, freedom of dissent. I saw the importance of dissent in government."

John Whitefox did not emerge to prominence. But he was among the final fourteen removed from Alcatraz. Thirty years later, Whitefox, a Choctaw from Oklahoma, wears a rumpled Army jacket as he collects bridge tolls for CalTrans, the California transportation authority. At age 46, strands of gray hair poke out from under a worn-out baseball cap.

At 16, he had stopped in San Francisco on his way to Seattle, chasing a girlfriend, when Alcatraz became a more potent lure.

It was more than a broken heart that brought Whitefox to Alcatraz, however. Like many American Indians, Whitefox felt lost on a reservation experiencing an exodus to the cities.



Alcatraz veteran John Whitefox (Choctaw) returned to the island in September. He was among the final 14 to be removed by U.S. Marshals on June 11, 1971. Today, he collects bridge tolls for CalTrans. Photo by Linda Sue Scott.

THE JOB IS NOT OVER

Some Alcatraz veterans lament that the Indian activism of the 1960s is dead.

"Indian youth today are very complacent," says George Horse Capture Sr., who in 1969 spent his first night on Alcatraz in a cell on Death Row—the only quiet place away from all the singing, dancing and drumming.

"Indian youth of today need to find their own 'Alcatraz.'"

Fortunate Eagle is optimistic. In his comfortable dining room in Nevada, grandchildren and dozens of pictures of his own three children surround him. "There are plenty of issues still unresolved. What they need is a 'cause.' "

Boyer isn't waiting. She is already rounding up a list of "issues still unresolved." They include battles to keep tribal gaming and affirmative action in place for American Indians (she is convinced she never would have made it into college without the latter), not to mention fights against a myriad of congressional bills that attack tribal sovereignty.

"They're just robbing us of everything," Boyer says of battles over water rights, fishing rights and protection of the air and land. She has founded the non-profit Atzlana Foundation to publicly tackle such issues.

On a Bay Area bridge, John Whitefox just laments how quickly three decades went by. He glances at the island, in plain view of where he works every day, and says, "I mean, thirty years, man, and this is all I am-a toll-booth worker for CalTrans." Time has stood still for Whitefox, perhaps because he sees Alcatraz every day and its physical features have changed little. From the tollbooth, the island is more literal than symbolic.

Yet, there are those who say Whitefox and the others did plenty.

"They are the true heroes, the true warriors, of this century," Fortunate Eagle says. "They recognized a cause and acted on it."

American history changed forever because of it. 

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