Living on Alcatraz

by Woesha Cloud North '40

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 dealings with the Caucasian inhabitants of this land, and hereby offer the following treaty:

We will purchase said Alcatraz Island for twenty-four 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 16 acres is more than was paid when Manhatten Island was sold, but we know that land values have risen over the years. Our offer of $1.24 per acre is greater than the 47 cents per acre the white men are now paying the California Indians for their land. . . .

We feel that this so-called Alcatraz Island is more than suitable for 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. It has inadequate sanitation facilities.
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 exceeded the land base.
10. 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. What use will we make of this land?

1. A Center of Native American Studies. . . .
2. An American Indian Spiritual Center. . . .
3. An Indian Center of Ecology. . . .
4. A Great Indian Training School. . . .

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Thus read the proclamation which American Indian students of the San Francisco Bay areas, Santa Cruz, and other California areas wrote, in conjunction with their elders, after the occupation of Alcatraz Island on November 20, 1969. They actually came on November 14, but the twenty of them were quickly and easily removed by the Coast Guard force. They came back, eighty strong, on November 20th to stay. By then everybody knew about what had happened, and the Coast Guard, under the direction of General Services Administration, did not act.

The public responded with an open heart to the requests for donations, including money. They also wanted to help the San Francisco American Indian Center because it had recently burned down, and had reopened in a storefront which handled Alcatraz' affairs until Alcatraz had an office and receiving depot of its own. All kinds of food kept coming—canned, boxed, fresh. Day-old bread kept the Islanders in supply for months, on into January. Cooking pots, blankets, camping equipment, warm coats of every shape and size, children's clothing, baby supplies were donated along with such un-warm clothing as ballgowns, bikinis, high-heeled shoes. A local restaurant supplied the Islanders with Thanksgiving dinner and Christmas dinner. The Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, Campfire girls and other youth organizations concerned themselves with helping Alcatraz in many ways and by providing toys.

Support came from the local area, the nation, even worldwide. People wanted to give us benefits, have us speak at schools, be on television and radio, and even have movie premieres, from Island. We were flooded with everything and everybody, from opportunists and vultures to sincere and dedicated people. Somehow, we survived all the glory and confusion even though we have never been the victims of attention before, and the symbol of the American Indian shone before the nation and the world. (*Indians of All Tribes* print-out issued November 20, 1970.)

On December 2, 1969, I decided to go to Alcatraz for a few days to find out for myself what it was like. It took planning. I packed up my sleeping bag, extra sweaters, slacks, some camping pots I was donating, and drove the 40 miles to the Indian Center to get my pass. Then I went on to Fisherman's Wharf, parked the car, and after waiting about an hour, boarded the boat for Alcatraz. At that time it was a 30-passenger craft run by an Alaskan fisherman who had donated his boat and services. The boat trip is a thing in itself. The salt air is refreshing, and at any time of day the view is spectacular—the Golden Gate Bridge, Fisherman's Wharf, the seagulls wheeling

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overhead, Oakland Bridge and Treasure Island, then Angel Island as the boat nears Alcatraz. The four-storied old government buildings set on the old Spanish fort foundation on the north side of the island loomed up above the docking area as we landed. "Indian Property" had been painted in large letters on the sign on the eastern side of the island. The Alcatraz Indian flag, with its tepee set in a field of red and white stripes, was flying high on a guard tower overlooking the dock.

It was getting dark when we docked. We had to climb from the boat to a large iron water barge and then step across to the extensive concrete area at the base of the four-storied building. The security guards were having their supper and boiling coffee in the shack set up as temporary headquarters, and I was told that supper was being served from the main cellblock on the upper level. I climbed the more than 200 steps to the top of the island to find that supper was over. Near the main cellblock and adjacent to the lighthouse and its housing was what looked like a former three-storied mansion with a large entrance hall, spacious rooms on either side of the hall, and on the right two large rooms served by a double fireplace. Two girls, one about five years old and the other the age of my own youngest girl, eleven, were trying to start a fire in one of the fireplaces by setting lighted matches to a pile of charcoal. I chatted with them and explained we needed more wood. We then went in search of wood all over the northern side of the island and finally got our fire going. I stowed my gear under a table in one of the rooms with the fireplace, then went with my new friends back down to the docking area. A huge fire was burning, about which a number of persons were seated. Among them was the Sioux woman who had set up a clinic and was donating her services as practical nurse to Alcatraz. While she sat waiting for her boatride to her night job on the mainland, she told us a legend and stories of her childhood. A couple of young men brought a load of freshly-caught crab, and after they were boiled we stood about a wooden wire-cable spool serving as a table and had a feast.

That night I bedded down in the glassed-in porch where clothing donations were being stored. At midnight a light flashed in my face. It was the Alaskan boat captain, helping a fellow Indian to find some shoes among the clothing.

A few days later I went home to tell my family that I was going to move to Alcatraz to work and help, but would be home on weekends.

All my life I have lived between two worlds, the Western-civilization-oriented, and the American-Indian-oriented. Although my parents were well-educated in the American tradition, and were Christianized Indians, they never forgot their own cultural traditions and upbringing. My father was full-blood Winnebago; my mother, half-Chippewa. He was born in a wigwam on the Winnebago, Nebraska reservation; she in a log cabin on the White Earth, Minnesota, reservation. My father graduated from Yale and received his M.A. there in anthropology. Later he became a minister and founded a school for Indian boys, the American Indian Institute, in Wichita, Kansas. He took his bride there in 1915 to help him with his school. My mother had graduated from Hampton Institute in Virginia, and had completed two years of nurse's training in Philadelphia. She had taught at Carlisle, the Indian Normal Training School in Pennsylvania, and on the Blackfeet reservation.

Two Alcatraz children.

My memories of early childhood in Wichita are filled with the Winnebago legends my father would tell us after we were in bed at night, and with the sound of the tom-tom beaten on many a Saturday night by students at his school. My mother was also a good storyteller, and we heard the stories around the campfires at home and around the many fires my father liked to build as we went camping during summer vacations on our way to visit relatives.

Eventually my father left the American Indian Institute to the capable supervision of the Presbyterian church in order to enter U.S. Government service to work for the Indian people on a larger scale. He became Representative at Large for the Commissioner of Indian Affairs. Whenever he travelled to the various reservations in the summertime, the family accompanied him. I remember vividly the ceremonies among the Blood of Alberta Province in Canada, watching a Navajo sand painting grow, and many other ceremonies of different regions: the Green Corn

Dance at San Ildefonso, the Zuni Rain Dance, the Sun Dance of the Cheyenne in Montana.

When I graduated from Vassar, I taught art for two years, first as an apprentice at Phoenix Indian School, a non-reservation boarding school to which children from all Southwestern tribes came; second, as an arts and crafts teacher in the U.S. Indian Service at the Pine Ridge reservation. The following two years I worked for my master's degree as a graduate assistant at Ohio University. My thesis was on "Contemporary Art Activities of Comparable American Indian Tribes."

Since the end of World War II I have lived in the San Francisco Bay Area with my non-Indian husband, who is a professor of political science at Stanford. When my five children were old enough, I completed the requirements for secondary school teaching, and from 1961 on taught art in the Palo Alto schools. At the same time, I became increasingly concerned to have my children better understand their American Indian cultural heritage. We visited my parents as long as they were living, then I turned to friends and relatives in the Midwest and took the children to visit them at the time of the annual pow-wows. We have attended the Gallup Inter-tribal ceremony; we have visited Hopi Country, and for the past several summers when the Wichita Indian community has put on a week-long Plains type pow-wow, we have often stayed with my cousins who manage it. Last summer I received my eagle feather at the Winnebago, Nebraska pow-wow.

Perhaps this autobiographical digression will explain why I told my family—and why they understood —that I felt I had to return to Alcatraz.

Alcatraz is rocky. Former gardeners provided the island with the green areas, trees, and plants. both coniferous and evergreen that grow on the north side of the island, and to the south and west are hardy plants that Californians know will grow well in rocky and unproductive soil. On the side looking towards the Golden Gate, the seagulls hover daily when feeding is best in the sea, and their droppings help fertilize the terraced areas formerly carefully tended. The garbage dump is also on that side. Sheer cliffs descend to the sea.

The main cell block tops the island and sprawls gaunt and impenetrable, surrounded by its high masonry walls topped by barbed wire, and punctuated every 50 yards by guard towers. All the metal is rusting now. The guard towers lean dangerously, and the metal ramps sag, unable to stand the penetration of years of sea air.

Inside the main cell block it is coldly damp as no heat could penetrate its cavernous rooms of concrete in the years of its abandonment. Yet here in the former kitchen and huge dining room with its cafeteria-style stainless steel tables, sinks, vats serving as huge cooking kettles, the Indians cooked and ate their meals for four long damp months.

In the community on Alcatraz there is a random sampling of individuals representing tribes from all over North America, and a few of South American derivation. There are men, women, and children ranging in age from 6 months to 50 years. Occasionally, there are older persons among the visitors, but the largest number of persons is under 35. The population fluctuates, depending upon the season of the year. There are more students during vacation periods, but there are usually 60 to 80 inhabitants. There has been a core population of about 30 individuals remaining for periods of six months who have made the community continuously a going thing.

The life of the community is like that of any other island community involving the need for boat transportation to and from the mainland for passengers and supplies. The members of the community cooperate to maintain the services for living quarters, eating, keeping well, protection, sanitation and garbage disposal; communication (including a radio station now not frequently operative), printing a newsletter, and other means of providing information such as speaking tours, press conferences; religious ceremonials and services, school, entertainment. These are maintained despite lack of running water; all water is brought in bottles from the mainland, and the corrosive saltwater is used for sanitation purposes. There is no steady source of heat.

The buildings and bungalows formerly provided for the families of the prison guards and the warden's house and clinic, were more comfortable to live in than the 4′ x 8′ modular cells equipped with toilet, sink, small table, cot. In the warden's house, the bungalows, some of the apartments, and one other building there are fireplaces where wood can be burned for warmth. But it took army-style equipment —ponchos, jackets rain-proofed and lined, woolen slacks and blankets, a multitude of old coats to throw on the floor, or over you, to be able to live on Alcatraz during the fall and winter months. Later in the spring and summer the days are golden, the air pollution-free, the breezes gentle on the western side. One can then look across the strip of water separating Alcatraz from San Francisco and not feel envy.

There was always lots of work that had to be done —to provide food, tow the garbage away, to man the boat, to truck and carry the supplies from the docks to the places of eating and living, to man the security force, to sift through well-intentioned Indian visitors who arrived with too much in the way of alcoholic donations.

We all attended weekly meetings, the general meeting, and if we wanted to, the All Tribes council meeting that preceded the general meeting. The island community had to be governed. In the early days there were daily meetings just to get the work going. The women took care of the pre-school children as well as all the cooking, washing, and sorting-out of clothes and other donations. The men took care of the rest.

Always there was an awareness of the political implication, the need of the American Indian to let the world know that he had been neglected and oppressed too long.

We also had the program of our school, All Tribes Elementary School, to work for. There was the necessity of keeping the classroom cleaned up daily, the toilets flushed down with water carried in buckets, the floors mopped, and the orderly arrangement of books with few shelves to put them on. Later on, one of the teachers persuaded a carpenter friend to build tables to the heights of the children: lower tables for the kindergarteners to third-graders, and a taller table for the fourth- through sixth-graders. Later, when four seventh-graders and one eighth-grader joined the ranks, a right-sized table was even found for them.

The All Tribes Elementary School was founded December 11, 1969 in the spirit of an experimental school, for the benefit of the children whose families had come to Alcatraz in the belief that American Indians all over the United States were not receiving fair attention for their rights, civil and legislative, having to do with quality education, housing, employment and social and political advantages. Theirs was and still is the lot of ethnic minorities, of a race of people whose land has been taken from them over the past 400 years. They are treated as a conquered people.

The All Tribes Elementary School recognizes the needs of Indians all over the North American continent. Primarily, we wanted to help the children realize their ethnic identity as American Indians. We found that although the children, at that time mostly California Indians, could not speak their native tongue, their parents could. We needed to help them keep up with their studies in reading, writing and arithmetic, so there was always the time set aside each day for these disciplines. Science was suggested by the marine life about us.

We were free to be experimental or flexible, inasmuch as our program was guided by the needs of the children and their families. I was happy to provide art instruction on demand. We had capable American Indian artists and craftsmen to teach not only leatherwork, beadwork, woodwork, some clay modelling, but also native dances and appropriate decoration for costumes.

We recognized that the children needed to live, within their own capabilities as children, their roles as members of families, and through the families membership, their roles in the political activist movement for American Indians in the United States. It was happening all around them on Alcatraz. They were not encouraged to take the roles of adults, but could help by keeping the island and schoolroom clean, or even by designing posters for coming events. We took them on a number of field trips to the San Francisco community because they were a part of that larger community, too. And they visited schools, both public and private, for the sake of extending the hand of friendship, and because we were asked. We were protective of our charges, however, because this sort of experience could easily turn into an exploitive one, particularly if newsmen were about.

Our teachers were a young woman (Choctaw) completing her B.A. degree in sociology at the University of California in Berkeley; a young man (Southern Ute) who had an M.A. in dramatic arts from Yale University, and myself. Our teachers' aides were several of the mothers, one (Paiute) training to be a librarian at University of California, one a former social case worker (Blackfeet) who helped us when she was not working in the Alcatraz office, and a mother (Klamath) who had completed two years of college, and, from time to time, some high school students. The arts and crafts teachers were a former Marine (Sauk and Fox) and a man and wife (Comanche) who appear regularly at many pow-wows in the Bay Area. The man is a well known singer.

Each of the five days of the week was divided into "hard core" subjects in the mornings and traditional arts and crafts, including songs and dances, in the afternoons. Our schedule was flexible, however. Ethnic studies were included in the social studies units whereby the children learned what Indian history they did not know already, and the legends of other tribes. We needed to fill in for their parents and grandparents the cultural information and mores that they had not received as a matter of course because the parents were too busy after they had been relocated from the reservations to urban centers. In some cases the traditions were being lost.

A reading lesson with Mrs. North.

Mrs. North teaches the children the art of beadwork. The thunderbird design in foreground is one of her own.

Since most of the children were from California Indian tribes, that was our starting point. It was particularly interesting to visit the Oakland Art Museum which has a good collection of models and Indian artifacts.

Contemporary American Indian history happened all about them. They could see how the tribal council operated and attend meetings conducted for the people of the island in order to keep things running as smoothly as possible.

In May of 1970 I gave up living on Alcatraz; the weekend commuting was too much and other commitments too pressing. I now go to the island one or two days a week to teach art classes.

One Monday in late October some students of All Tribes Elementary School had a reunion of sorts. They gathered in Sacramento, under the state capital dome, to view their artistic efforts and those of other American Indian children from all over the state. This particular exhibit had taken a lot of effort and imagination on the part of the teachers of the children, the director of the exhibit, and the children themselves. We drove from San Francisco early that morning to arrive a little before noon. As we went into the capital building, we met two former teachers, one former teacher's aide (currently head teacher and member of the All Tribes Council) and her daughter, aged 10. In the foyer were five of our former students and their father, now residing in Sacramento. The oldest boy of this family, now in the seventh grade, had on exhibition a sketch for and a skin painting of the "Battle of the Little Big Horn" (some call it the "Custer Massacre"). Our other children had illustrated their life on Alcatraz. Most of the California school children had executed paintings of the landscape about them, the insects, trees, and streams they saw, the Indian basketry, the legends, and homes.

Many busloads of school children came to see the exhibit and to attend the program which featured the Indian teacher at Humboldt State who told California tribal legends and exhibited basketry.

Alcatraz is now halfway through its second year of occupation. The elementary school still goes on. Its mere existence has won recognition in many quarters that ethnic studies with a base in authenticity are important for school curricula on all levels.

One might wonder about the social and family problems the children face whenever they return to the mainland. Several families have, in fact, returned to the ghetto areas from which they had sought to escape. Indian families help each other by offering hospitality to friends, but, as a result, living conditions get very crowded. Those who can work do so but their skills do not command enough income to support the families adequately. The Indian Centers in the Bay Area and privately-funded clinics and referral offices continue to help the members of the Indian community as they have in the past decade.

Recently, the federal government has appointed some American Indians to significant positions. They can best understand the plight of their people and they are being listened to. It is encouraging to see the action that is being taken, and in particular, pilot projects in the San Francisco Bay Area designed to improve the education and living conditions of the American Indian. Much work needs yet to be done.