

news from **native** california



ROCK MEMORIES

Half-naked, be-feathered red men were paddling a canoe around the prison island. They were slapping cupped hands to their mouths and emitting bloodcurdling war whoops. That is the image of the Alcatraz Indian occupation that popped into my head when I heard about it on the radio in late November of 1969. I was eleven years old, living in East Oakland. Even though I had lived on a reservation a few years earlier, I knew little of my Native heritage other than that I was a “full-blooded Indian.” Alcatraz was the beginning of my Native education.

At that time, we were a struggling family, Indians lost in the urban tundra that was the East

Oakland ghetto. The Black Panther Party headquarters was around the corner from us. It was a neighborhood of nighttime gunshots, nighttime ghosts, broken glass, and broken dreams. There were muggings outside our front door. One time it was my brother Elvin. At one point the front door to our apartment was stolen. We were in a tight spot, but I did not really have a grasp of the desperate nature of my family’s situation. My poor mother was single-handedly trying to raise five children. I was more interested in dodge ball, tag, and *Gilligan’s Island* (on our small black-and-white television). At the same time, I think I realized that we were in a place where we did not

An exuberant woman flashes the peace sign to the photographer.

With her on the truck is Gino. The peace sign was a greeting to express a common purpose stemming from the anti-Vietnam War movement. Alcatraz Island, March 1971.

Photo by Ilka Hartmann.





want to be. It was a place we needed to be rescued from. And along came the war-whooping Indians.

One morning shortly thereafter, while sitting down to a meager breakfast—dry cereal in a glass—Mom asked us what we thought about going to join the occupation. Again the image of those war-whooping Indians popped into my head. We were going to join those wild Indians! Woo hoo! For me it was a promise of adventure, a wild schoolboy fantasy.

I can remember the anticipation and excitement we felt as we ate breakfast that morning. Our little heads filled with images and questions about the big changes before us. Little did we realize the full nature of those changes. There were big changes ahead for all Native people, resulting from Operation “Take the Rock.”

The next thing that I remember, we had packed a few of our possessions, our flimsy sleeping bags, and our family cat, Aristotle, and hopped onto the bus to the big city, San Francisco. We did not really know how big the “big city” was until we tried to walk through it. We walked for block after block and it still seemed as though the buildings in the distance remained buildings in the distance. As we

were trudging along one of the main boulevards, Market or Mission, a motley crew carrying our worldly belongings, Mom began to doubt the sanity of her desperate action. Suddenly a van pulled up alongside of us. The large side door slid open. It was an elderly Indian man who had a better idea of where we were headed. He asked us to come along with him. This man was Mad Bear Anderson, a respected elder and leader of the Hau-de-nau-sau-ne. He gave us a lift to the new Indian center.

This new center was a temporary set-up in a small storefront unit. I can remember sitting in this place for a while, looking out the big storefront window, amid a lot of commotion and supplies which were also headed to Alcatraz. The old Indian center had recently burned down. A spark from that flame helped ignite the fire of Indian militancy then burning among local urban Indians. The local Indians had lost their meeting place and their community center, so they began to meet in their own homes. These home meetings eventually led to the activism that was responsible for the occupation.

James Maupin (Klamath), left, an friend in the main block, May 1970. Photo by Ilka Hartmann.

"We will not give up." Eighteen-year-old Oohosis, a Cree from Canada, and Peggy Lee Ellenwood, a Sioux from Wolf Point, Montana, give the Red Power salute moments after their removal by federal marshals from Alcatraz Island to the mainland. June 11, 1971. Photo by Ilka Hartmann.



It was not until years later that I was able to pinpoint the cause of the good feeling in my heart. I realized that this was the important ingredient that had been missing from our lives. These were our people: Indians, Indians, and more Indians.

It was nightfall by the time we were shuttled down to the dock that had been secured for ferrying people and supplies over to the island. Maybe we were waiting for nightfall to make the dash past the blockade. The dock was down at Fisherman's Wharf. I remember feeling apprehensive as we loaded ourselves onto a small motorboat. It would be my first ride out onto the bay. I believe it was my first ride in a boat of any kind. To make the occasion even more exciting and mysterious, the ocean and the sky melted together in blackness. We were stepping onto a boat hovering in the void. Stars and lights twinkled above and below us. The five of us boarded our pitching and swaying transport and motored into the unknown night without a backward glance.

The ride was exhilarating. It was a brisk late November night on the bay. The cold wind pushed against our faces as we eyed our destination, a

dark silhouette capped by a lone revolving beam shining to all corners of the bay. Our breakfast in Oakland seemed so long ago. My vision of war-whooping Indians was fading fast.

As our little speedboat churned into the night, we approached the Coast Guard blockade. We bounced on the waves as our boat picked up speed. Some passengers had clambered onto the flat prow of the boat because there was not enough room in the boat. These riders had to cling a little tighter. Coast Guard vessels maneuvered in the distance, but they were too slow. We sped past them. The dark mysterious silhouette of the island loomed large before us. We headed for the east side of the island where there was a little floating barge below the main dock. The boat, dock pillars, and barge bumped up to each other amid the sounds of licking waves and creaking barges and boats. A foghorn blared in the distance.

From the moment Mad Bear had first picked us up, we had been caught in whirlwinds of activity. Now here was another one, as hands and faces greeted us and helped us. We were pulled out of the boat by these friendly strangers. What kept us at ease, to a certain extent, were the familiar faces we encountered along our pilgrimage. These caring faces were not people we had ever met, but we knew them and they knew us. It was like visiting with lost family. These people cared. They wanted to help us. And we could trust these people. There was an instant connection, but at the time I was not sure of the source of that connection. It was not until years later that I was able to pinpoint the cause of the good feeling in my heart. I realized that this was the important ingredient that had been missing from our lives. These were our people: Indians, Indians, and more Indians.

As we stepped onto the main dock, people helped us with our belongings and gave us directions and advice. Someone said, "Come with me." We followed that person, who led us to our new home. This woman was Vickie Santana, one of the first of many new friends we would make during the occupation. On Alcatraz you are also greeted by steps. There are many, many steps. They climb up and down the island. The maze of steps takes you to the main cellblock, to the

top of the lighthouse, to the bowels of the dungeon and the nineteenth-century structures. You can take rarely traveled steps to hidden corners or secret shortcuts. There are other steps that would be more at home on a Mayan temple. As we followed our host, we climbed and climbed. First we climbed the steep, aged stairs from the dock to the second level. Then we walked around that level to more steps to the top level, to the main cellblock, where the occupiers had set up their land base. From there we climbed another set of stairs at the front of the cell block to some rooms that seemed to have been some sort of offices or official meeting rooms, or at least not a place for prisoners. There were wood-paneled walls. In one of these rooms we were told we could make ourselves at home. We did. We slept.

My brother Elvin and I were put on "KP" (kitchen patrol) duty. We were put under the charge of one Peter Williams, a.k.a. Peter Blue Cloud, a Mohawk from Akwesasne, New York. Together we cleaned up the old cellblock kitchen. It was a major effort on our part, undoing years of dirt, disrepair, and neglect. I remember doing a lot of sweeping.

We also dealt with the avalanche of donations from a sympathetic public: food, clothes, money, and all sorts of items that people thought might



Belva Cottier (Sioux) and a young Chicano friend during the occupation of Alcatraz. Cottier was among the original occupiers during the symbolic claiming of Alcatraz by Native Americans in 1964. Alcatraz Island, May 1970. Photo by Ilka Hartmann.

be useful to us. A lot of it was just plain junk. You know, like that odd little can of food that has been sitting at the back of your cupboard for years. We had boxes of them. We had high heels and party dresses. We had pickled bamboo shoots. We were ready for anything.

During Christmas it was a little more hectic than usual as everyone prepared for a big feast. Late on Christmas Eve the regular cooks had gone out and left Elvin and me in charge of preparing and cooking the rest of the turkeys. We ended up stuffing them with loaves of bread before tossing them into the ovens. It was pretty wild, you had to have been there. Late in the night we got a case of the giggles and laughed and laughed as we stuffed the turkeys with handfuls of sliced bread. It was such an incongruous chain of events, two young boys staying up all night alone, stuffing turkeys with loaves of bread!

I remember listening to Richard Oakes speak at one of the general meetings in the old prison theater. He was an inspirational and charismatic speaker. I don't remember what he said. Even at the time I was not really sure of the specifics of what he was talking about, but I remember the feeling like it was yesterday. In a forceful but loving way he

gave us hope and determination. At eleven years old, I was ready to follow him anywhere.

As our little community became more organized and the population stabilized, we were gradually relieved of our jobs in the kitchen and donation organization. The women took over the kitchen responsibilities. Peter went on to establish the *Indians of All Tribes* newsletter.

For a month or two we kids busied ourselves with making go-carts from the old workshop dollies and laundry carts. Our goal was to make a cart that could navigate the zigzagging road from the cell block down to the dock. It was a harrowing ride with steep hills and sharp curves. We probably could have used helmets. Good thing we had a clinic on the island; I went there a couple of times over the course of my stay on the island.

As kids, we had a lot of free time, even after the school was started. We explored every nook and cranny of the island. Twelve acres open for adventure: old buildings dating to the Civil War, huge old warehouses, and workshops with old equipment lying around. There were the gym, small beaches, cliffs to climb, old guard gangways along the cliffs or high above the cell blocks, a car

Native Americans from many tribes and their guests wait for the boat on the dock of Alcatraz Island. During the occupation, Indians came from near and far to visit Alcatraz, like a pilgrimage. May 1970. Photo by Ilka Hartmann.





junk yard, the dock, caves, the dungeon below the main call block.

We lived all over the place. At one point a couple of us lived in one of the old broken-down vans. A bunch of us bedded down in the dungeon for a while. I even stayed in the tipi that has come to visually symbolize the Indian occupation. Sometimes we just sat around campfires late into the night, teasing each other with stories of the ghost of Scarface Charley (a California Indian incarcerated on the rock in the 1870s).

On weekends there were many big get-togethers of one kind or another. There would be an influx of visitors, big feasts, proclamations, and powwow singing. There were rock dances in the officer's hall. There were traditional Native ceremonies, too. There was a Yuwipi Ceremony in the gym. Holy people from all over came and did prayers and blessings at the four corners of the island. Celebrities, Native and non-Native, came to see us, to offer us moral and physical support.

One time there was a huge bonfire in the courtyard and Pomo Bighead dancers from E'lem in

Lake County danced into the night. This was my first exposure to the traditions of my ancestors, the Pomo and Wintu. This early exposure to my own traditional culture would prove to be an inspiration for me in later years, as I sought to learn about my roots and traditions.

As my siblings and I grew up, we all became involved in Indian affairs and activities of one kind or another. My brother was even chairman of our tribe for a while. We took Native American studies courses. We went to all the different types of Native gatherings. The friends we made on Alcatraz became lifelong friends. And as I mentioned earlier, I was inspired by our Alcatraz sojourn to reconnect with my Native Californian roots. I have learned, and continue to learn, the traditional and ceremonial arts and history of my people. Most importantly though, my vision of Indians as bloodthirsty war-whooping terrorists turned into a vision of family, community, and people struggling and laughing amidst great cultural changes. ▼

This young Navajo man hitchhiked all the way from Arizona to be part of the occupation for one weekend. He had never left the Navajo Reservation before. Alcatraz Island, March 1970. Photo by Ilka Hartmann.