

NATIVE AMERICAN YOUTH OVERVIEW

One of America's greatest shames is that most of those who have come to this land know so little about its original inhabitants. Add to that the fact that most, if not all, treaties made by the white man were broken, partial genocide accomplished, and finally that American Indians were kept on reservations under paternalistic policies—one would think there would at least be an American Indian month, as there is in respect for African Americans. It is time, not only to learn about, but also to learn from, Native Americans.

It is not clear how and when the first inhabitants came to the Americas. It was probably a crossing from Siberia into Alaska, and it probably took place about 30,000 years ago. It is fascinating to study the growth of these peoples from a stone age culture to the woodland cultures, to the advanced cultures of Aztecs, Mayans, and Incas. It seems probably that these cultures, separated as they were by great distances, still learned from each other.

There is much for other Americans to learn in the relationship of these people to their environment, in their religion, and in their social wisdom needing to be recovered by urban citizens today. But it will only be learned by those who become friends of Indians and their culture.

Historians have estimated the native population of the Americas, at the time of European invasion and conquest, to be about 90 million people. That breaks down to about

- 10 Million in what is today Canada and the US.
- 30 Million in what is today Mexico.
- 11 Million in Central America.
- 445,000 In what was called the West Indies.
- 39 Million in South America.

The European invasions decimated this population by slaughter, forced labor, famine, and diseases introduced from Europe.

Native American population (in Alaska and 48 states) is about 2 million. The US Bureau of Census lists twenty-five American Indian Tribes: the five largest, according to number of persons, being the Cherokee (369,035), Navajo (225,298), Sioux (107,321), Chipewa (105,988) and Choctaw (86,231). And there are twenty more large tribal groups and hundreds of smaller ones.

By number of residents, the top 10 reservations in the US are

- Navajo and trust lands, AZ—143,405

- Pine Ridge and trust lands, NE & SD—11,182
- Apache, AZ—9,825
- Gila River, CA—9,162
- Papago, AZ—8,480
- Rosebud and trust lands, SD—8,043
- San Carlos, AZ—7,110
- Zuni Pueblo, AZ—7,073
- Hopi and trust lands, UT—7,061
- Blackfeet, MT—7,025

Highest urban populations of Native Americans are as follows:

- New York—0.3% of NY's total population of 18 million.
- Los Angeles—0.6% of LA's total population of 14.5 million.
- Chicago—0.2% of Chicago's 8 million population.
- San Francisco—0.7% of San Francisco's 6.3 million.
- Philadelphia—0.2% of 5.9 million.
- Detroit—0.4% of 4.7 million.
- Boston—0.2% of 4.2 million.
- Dallas—0.5% of 3.9 million.
- Washington, DC—0.3% of 3.9 million.
- Houston—0.3% of 3.7 million.

A U.S. Department of Education Profile of Average Number of Years of Education by race or ethnic group breaks down this way:

- Asian or Pacific Islander—13.0
- White—12.8
- Native American—11.7
- African American—11.6
- Latino—10.2

Young American Indians growing up on reservations face issues of poverty, identify, high rates of depression, alcoholism, and suicide. A 26-year-old who called himself Bam Bam, told the *New York Times* how he had been beaten by gang rivals as he walked home in the dark. ("On Indian Reservations in the West, Violent Crime Soars," 16 August 1998, p. 28) " 'It's gotten almost like the inner city here,' he said as he opened his jacket to show a pistol." Many areas say they are short on police officers and too big on territory. A sixty-year-old teacher lamented, " 'Today's kids have lost respect for their parents and their neighbors. I don't know how to turn it around.' " A 24-year-old Navajo gang member explained: " 'To stay strong we had to band together. It was more for fun at first, but then people took it to the next level.' "

Red Lightening, a teenage recent graduate from Marty High School in South Dakota tells how he senses the atmosphere change when he walks into a store or gas station. " 'I don't really get a lot of racist remarks. What I get is a feeling, or a look here and there. It's been like that as long as I remember. It could change, but I don't expect it to.' "

A Garnet News Service poll showed less than half of the American Indians polled (46%) saying they believe there are more chances to advance than there were 20 years ago. In the same poll, almost 75% of Asian and Hispanic youth saw more opportunity, 59% of blacks and 83% of whites. (Woster, T. "Young American Indians Can't Shake Pessimism," *Argus Leader*, Sioux Falls, SD, 14 June 1998 from Internet)

Gambling casinos have brought jobs and opportunities to many reservations but not without problems that always attend such an enterprise. The Indian Gaming Regulatory Act of 1988 opened an era in which one third of the nation's 554 tribes have opened gambling operations that generate an estimated \$6 billion a year. Many Indian leaders are investing income from gambling in long term ventures that will stabilize the economy. The Cour d'Arlene Indians of Idaho began in a modest bingo hall and small casino which has grown and established the tribe as a strong economic force. Chief David J. Matheson explains that the Cour D'Arlene view gambling as merely a means to an end—that end being a diversified tribal economy that will benefit not only the tribe but the surrounding community.

Ultimately, we'd like gaming to be a footnote to our history, to be able to say that it was here and we used it for a purpose because we chose to (Chief Matheson said). But my hope is that someday we can phase out gaming completely.

Cultural conflict with the established society continues. In Neah Bay, Washington, the Makah tribe (of 1,800) are attempting to resurrect a tradition of a yearly whale hunt. They see this hunt (begun in 1998 after a 70-year moratorium) as crucial to the tribes regaining its lost cultural pride and history—a link to a time of independence and pride. Animal rights and environmental groups are opposing them. The Indians point to a Treaty of Neah Bay giving them the right to harvest whales.

In Plymouth, Massachusetts, Indian activists clashed with police on Thanksgiving, 1998. A compromise finally dropped charges against the activists, agreed to post plaques honoring Indians, and the funded Indian educational programs. In New York City, several items were withdrawn from a 1998 auction of American Indian art after several tribes protested the sale of objects sacred in their culture.

The decline of the American buffalo saddened many. By 1889, there were less than 300 buffalo left, 200 of them in Yellowstone National Park. The herd in Yellowstone was used for a rebuilding program. As their number passed 2,000, the buffalo were wandering out of the park into the grazing land of ranchers. This led for calls to limit their growth through policies such as limited hunting. The land and the debate became political. We learn from listening to the voices of tribal opposition to the killing of buffalo.

(Arthur Owen, a Dakota Sioux from Prairie Island reservation): Not only is the buffalo *wakan* (holy), but he is also mysterious. Our holy men told us that one day the buffalo nation's going to come back. And they told us, 'When they come back this time, take care of them.'

(Fred DuBray, a Lakota from Cheyenne River Reservation in South Dakota): When people talk about 'a buffalo problem,' it reminds me of what they used to call an 'Indian problem.' We simply have to stop killing the buffalo. They mean too much to us and to our relationships. They represent our last hope. Because if they can't survive as buffalo, we can't survive as tribes.

(Wabun-Inini or Vernon Bellecourt, American Indian Movement activist) It isn't the buffalo who need thinning out. We should start thinning out some of these settlers and send them back to the hills of Georgia and Kentucky. Get their cattle and their sheep and themselves out of the natural habitat of the eagle, the wolf, and the buffalo. (Coleman, N. Let The Buffalo Roam. *The St. Paul Pioneer Press*, 7 October 1998, p. 1B, 5B)

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Do you know enough about Indian culture and beliefs, problems and hopes?
2. What about this article most impresses you or disturbs you?
3. How do you think America could best address its broken promises and injustices to Native Americans?
4. How do you think understanding and justice between American society and Native Americans could be achieved?

IMPLICATIONS

1. As with all controversial issues, the truth is usually not in the extremes. Somehow understanding must be reached through relationships and positive dialogue.

2. Grievances of American Indians, African Americans, and other minorities cannot be equated or dealt with in exactly the same way. But all must be heard and given attention.
3. A tree cannot be healthy if it has rotten roots. Societies cannot thrive with unresolved moral issues. The Declaration of Independence and Constitution demanded an Emancipation Proclamation, further Amendments, and Civil Rights legislation. America must be sure justice has been, and is being, done for all.
4. This issue should be of interest to all young Americans.

Dean Borgman cCYS
