

## Archival Captive— The American Indian

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REUBEN SNAKE, a Winnebago, has come up with a lengthy definition of what it is to be an Indian, some of which I would like to share with you. According to Reuben Snake, to be an Indian is:

watching John Wayne whip 50 of your kind with a single-shot pistol and a rusty pocket-knife on the late show;

having every third person you meet tell you about his great-grandmother who was a real Cherokee princess; and

having 9 out of 10 people tell you how great they believe Jim Thorpe, Squanto, Tonto, and Little Beaver are.

I would like to suggest that Reuben Snake might add another to his list: "To be an Indian is having non-Indians control the documents from which other non-Indians write their version of your history."

You are probably acquainted with Mari Sandoz's fine historical novel entitled *Crazy Horse*. It provides an excellent picture of life among the plains Sioux in the late nineteenth century. One of her characters is Bad Heart Bull, a band member whose special responsibility was to maintain and pass on the traditions of his people.

In a conversation with the young Crazy Horse, Bad Heart Bull makes the observation that "A people without history is like the wind on the buffalo grass." I was struck by the imagery; although, since the concept of history as we know it is alien to Indian cultures, I rather doubt that Bad Heart Bull would have said anything quite like this.

Indians do lack a history, as we usually employ the term. However, I am sure that this is a judgment that most Native Americans would challenge. As everyone knows who has attempted to interview Indians about their personal or tribal past, they frequently do not react in the same manner to such questions as do non-Indians.

Non-Indians invariably cast in a time frame their responses to questions about their experiences. Just as formal history is based on a continuum, so are our informal efforts to recapture the past. We begin at a point back in time and progress to the present. "Last week," or "Last year," or "When I was a child" are all phrases which we automatically invoke to begin our meander along the paths of our personal history; and it almost invariably is a stroll in one direction,

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toward the present. And the result has a coherence for us and for our listeners, whether we are engaging in social conversation or making a case in a court of law.

Indians are much less prone to make a similar response. First, Indian cultures do not stress time sequences. An Indian who has not been profoundly influenced by our culture normally would not arrange his recollections in such a continuum. Even if he were so inclined, he probably would lack the resources on which the non-Indian who wants to do a little personal or family history can draw—the collections of family letters, the diaries, the local newspaper files.

Native Americans would hasten to point out that I have omitted tribal folklore and the type of information that we today refer to as oral history. Indeed, many Indians feel that they are especially endowed with the ability to transmit orally the essentials of their experience as a people.

From 1967 to 1972 Doris Duke Cromwell subsidized an extensive oral history project in which seven universities participated, each, pretty much in its own fashion, collecting oral history from tribes in its vicinity. This was a worthy endeavor and undoubtedly saved for posterity Indian recollections that might otherwise have been lost to us.

But frequently their greatest value is as a record of how Indians in the 1960s and 70s perceived events of their personal or tribal past. And, as anyone can testify who has used this material or done his own interviewing, Indian memory can be as fallible as that of non-Indians. Indians too fall prey to senility, and their current family and factional loyalties can influence their interpretation of past events, just as our memories are influenced. This was impressed upon me when I was in the process of interviewing Comanches about Quanah Parker, the celebrated Comanche chief. Clearly, the Quanah that emerges from the testimony of an informant today is largely determined by the informant's family and factional ties.

Fortunately, there also is available on Quanah and his fellow Comanches, as there is for other tribes, archival material on a scale unsurpassed for any other group in American society. The reason for this is obvious. First as "domestic dependent nations," to use John Marshall's phrase, and then as wards of the United States, Comanches have been the subjects of a volume of paper work that is positively staggering.

For a tribe numbering in the late nineteenth century no more than two or three thousand people, one can find reports, correspondence, school and census records, and other pertinent materials without equal in volume for any non-Indian group of comparable size in American society.

The volume is caused by several generations of bureaucrats churning out the paperwork in a steadily growing bureaucracy. The Bureau of Indian Affairs may have originated with only three individuals in the 1820s, but by 1972 it took 500 Indians just to occupy the Washington headquarters of the B.I.A.

According to Annie Heloise Abel, if Woodrow Wilson had not vetoed an inaugural ball as part of the ceremony surrounding his elevation to the presidency, there might today be fewer documents to intimidate a researcher. According to Abel, the nucleus for what is today the National Archives collection was to have been the base for the bandstand for the ball. It is fortunate that the records were saved, because the only thing worse for the researcher than a plethora of records is a paucity of them.

There is another problem besides the sheer bulk of the records available about an Indian tribe, and that problem relates to the provenance of the records. These records are almost exclusively the product of white men.

The series of annual reports compiled by Indian agents and printed in the Congressional Serial Set is one of the most accessible and widely used sources about Indians during the reservation period. The agent summarized important developments for the year at his agency and provided vital statistics.

It is well to keep in mind, however, that these reports were prepared by men interested in demonstrating that all was going well at their agencies. For example, an annual report written by an agent who has held the post for three or four years may leave the impression of a reservation teeming with industrious Indians, all of whom are building homes, cultivating crops, and anxious to enroll their children in school.

But the next year's report, written by a new agent, will emphasize the difficulties he has inherited. The reservation now seems populated by lazy Indians content to live in tepees, refusing to acquaint themselves with the hoe and the plow, and adamantly opposed to permitting their children inside a classroom.

If the new agent lasts for a few years his annual reports will document a steady improvement. By the time he leaves office he will be describing a situation comparable to the progressive establishment his predecessor had depicted in his last report. A new agent then is ready to begin the entire cycle again.

There are comparable problems with the other archival sources—the journals, reports, letters, and diaries. These are the work of white officials in the Indian service, white traders, white settlers, white missionaries, white travellers. Not only are these white men unsympathetic to the Indian viewpoint—if not downright hostile—they are often lamentably ignorant of what they were observing and trying to describe.

I had this impressed upon me again this past year when two students included in research papers material gleaned from two annual reports. Since the reports came from the serial set and represented the observations of Indian agents, the students accepted them uncritically. Unfortunately, both reporting agents apparently had misinterpreted what they were observing.

In one instance, an agent for the Pawnee described a ceremony he himself had observed. In the ceremony, a warrior would demonstrate his willingness to make sacrifices in the common interest by casting off his dearest possession, a favorite wife. The agent, however, failed to appreciate the significance of the warrior's action and saw in it only evidence of immorality and lack of stability in Indian marital relations.

In the second instance, an agent for the Western Shoshone obviously was ignorant of the custom among Indians of segregating menstruating women. The white man not only exaggerated what he observed but drew from it incorrect conclusions regarding its impact on the tribal birth rate.

Probably neither of these white men had known anything about Indians before being assigned as Indian agents. Nevertheless, to students reading their reports a century later, they are primary sources and they carry weight.

I was somewhat sympathetic with the mistakes of these students, as I have made grosser errors, with less excuse. Witness a paper on Comanche leadership I read ten or twelve years ago to a scholarly audience.

The subject of my paper was the change in the mix of leadership qualities required in Indians once they were forced to give up their free life on the plains and locate on reservations. To illustrate my thesis I offered two examples. One was an Indian whose willingness to adjust to the new situation clearly was a factor in his rise to leadership in the reservation period. The other was a medicine man who had played a leading role in his people's last war, but apparently had faded into the background during the reservation period. My thesis was that the qualities necessary for leadership in a plains tribe before defeat and incarceration were not those needed after defeat and incarceration.

It was all very obvious, very tidy and neat, and was well received. Unfortunately for my thesis, I later learned that the medicine man had indeed survived in a leadership role in the reservation period, but under a different name. Fortunately, I already had tenure and had not felt the need to rush into print with my nice little essay.

But think of the damage we can do the Indians. The historical Indian may be the captive of the archives, but the key to those archives is in the hands of non-Indian historians and ethno-historians.

And, inevitably, even with the best of intentions, we approach the subject from the standpoint of an outsider. Francis Jennings's study of Indian-white contact in the colonial period has been praised by some and censured by others, both groups reacting to the fact that he is sympathetic to the Indians and critical of the whites. Jennings deals essentially with the actions of the whites and the responses they provoked among the Indians. He is much better on the actions of the whites than he is on the reactions of the Indians. And for the same old reasons. His sources are the usual ones: the records, public and private, of white men.

Had Jennings had available to him the necessary documents of Indian origin to write a truly Indian history, he would have faced another problem. He would have had to restrict the scope of his story considerably, writing it from the perspective of a single tribe or, at best, from the perspective of a few confederated tribes. Indians think of themselves first and foremost as Comanches, Shawnees, or Delawares, and their history, to be significant to them, must be written in those terms. This requirement, of course, poses problems for those who would maintain that any Indian, as he possesses the Red equivalent of Soul, can write Indian history.

If Indians think of themselves primarily as Comanches, or Shawnees, or Delawares—and they do—how successfully can they separate themselves from traditional tribal allegiances?

Will the Navajo accept an Indian history of the Southwest written by a Hopi? Can a Sioux find happiness with an account of inter-tribal warfare in the northern woodlands written by a Chippewa? I doubt it.

The problem of dealing with literally hundreds of different cultures, different peoples, has greatly influenced the form of Indian history. One solution has been general histories which, despite titles like that of one I wrote, *American Indians*, generally have as a main theme the evolution of a United States policy for Indians. In short, they tell us more about ourselves than they tell us about Indians.

Another solution has been tribal histories focused on a single Indian group. However, the rhythm of the account is usually established by key events in non-

Indian history. Thus the American Revolution, the Civil War, and comparable watersheds in United States history are imposed on the structure of Delaware or Shawnee history.

Robert Berkhofer has deplored the fact that the history of Native Americans is "the by-product of the white story rather than a story in its own right," and he has called for a new Indian-centered history. Nevertheless, the best that Berkhofer can propose, recognizing as he does that even an Indian writing the history of his own tribe would be principally dependent on the usual archival sources, is that we "read between the lines."

By this he presumably means that the historian, Indian or non-Indian, should try to overcome the problems inherent in the provenance of his sources by trying to extract from them an Indian point of view. That, I would submit, is an objective with which a number of us have approached the documents, but without any remarkable success.

Presumably Berkhofer would not regard Dee Brown's *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, enthusiastically greeted by Indians and many of their white sympathizers, as a model for Indian-centered history. However, clearly what Brown did was read between the lines, using the same sources he previously had used to produce works written from the viewpoint of the white soldier and the white settler. The result is a history in which the events are unaltered, but the principal actors switch headgear; the Indians put on the white hats and their opponents, the soldiers and settlers, are left with the black hats.

But, for the Native American this is more than just some intellectual game. What is at stake for the Indian is his historical identity, and all that can mean for self-image and psychological well-being.

At stake also is the very existence of tribes, and the validity of their claims to millions of acres of land and to compensation for injustices suffered in earlier transactions with the federal and state governments.

Since 1946 well over half a million dollars has been awarded tribes who have brought suit against the government before the Indian Claims Commission. Perhaps a hundred cases remain to be adjudicated. The total judgments rendered in behalf of the Indians will probably be in the vicinity of three-quarters of a billion dollars.

The Indian claims cases received relatively little attention from the general public. The segment of the public that was aware was generally sympathetic, particularly since there was little financial impact on the average citizen. He would ultimately pay for it through his taxes, but it had little immediacy for him.

In the last two or three years, citizens in the East have been rudely awakened by a new series of Indian claims. And these are not claims against a remote federal treasury but rather claims against state and local governments and sometimes private land owners. Beginning with the Penobscot and Passamaquoddy suit against the state of Maine, the claims generally rest on an interpretation of the 1790 Indian Intercourse Act.

The 1946 Indian Claims Commission Act launched a period of litigation providing employment for many law firms and not a few scholars who appeared as expert witnesses. Just as the end of that series of cases is in sight, along comes the new set of Indian claims. As the Indians and their opponents gird for action, the lawyers check their rate schedules and historians and anthropologists begin to jockey for position as members of the opposing legal teams. But this is one

game in which the team opposing the Indians has difficulty recruiting players.

Historians and anthropologists working on Indian subjects have some reluctance to appear against the Indians. In part it is our sympathy with the underdog; in part it is a frank recognition that one's appearance in court to testify against, say, the Penobscots, will not facilitate field work among that tribe, indeed may make it extremely difficult. The first question I was asked by a member of a Pacific Northwest tribe a few years ago, when he learned that I was interested in doing research on his tribe, was a very direct "Which side are you on?" He could not conceive of my not being for or against the Indians, and clearly my getting any cooperation from the tribal council of which he was a member depended on my being on the side of the tribe.

Indians have become highly sensitized to their legal relationships with federal and state governments. In what appears to be an increasingly litigious America, they are conspicuously litigious. It would be difficult to find a western tribe that in the last thirty years has not been involved in at least one suit against the federal government. And now it is to be the turn of tribes in the East, whose existence, in many cases, had been ignored by the federal government. I say "*had* been ignored" because the Justice Department is backing tribes in some of the suits they are now bringing against states.

In this new series of suits, as with those before the Indian Claims Commission, the Indians operate under certain disadvantages. They are forced to deal with a legal system not of their making. The historical documents upon which they depend in varying degrees are in archival possession, not theirs.

I have seen a story to the effect that the land case against Maine originated with an old treaty that had been stashed away in a box beneath the bed of an elderly Passamaquoddy. Even if so, it would have little bearing on the case of the Penobscots and Passamaquoddies. There is ample documentation in archival records that these tribes had negotiations with Maine and Massachusetts outside the purview of the federal government.

Once again, scholars are being mobilized to lend the weight of their expertise to the opposing sides. In the case of the Wampanoags of Cape Cod, the first task of the Indians was to demonstrate their existence as a tribe. To do so required testimony from anthropologists about the culture of the group claiming Indian status, and testimony from historians to document their existence as a tribe for over three centuries of contact with the white population.

Once again the Indians are dependent primarily on non-Indian specialists in law, history, and anthropology to help them obtain justice in the courts. However, there are signs that the Indians are developing the necessary talents to do the job themselves. Law schools appear to have been the most attractive option open to young Indians interested in postgraduate work. Native American law institutes have appeared at the universities of New Mexico and Oklahoma, each of them publishing materials relating to contemporary legal problems for Indians.

In addition, there is the Institute for the Development of Indian Law, in Washington, D.C. It publishes a journal and its objective is, in its own words, to "strengthen the rights of Indian people through legal and historical research, publication, and advocacy."

Practically all primary anthropological and historical research in the field of Indian culture and history is carried on by non-Indian scholars usually with



appointments to colleges and universities, scholars who acquired their skills in extensive graduate training.

Nevertheless, Indians are being encouraged to interest themselves in their tribal histories and in the development of tribal archives. Two programs are particularly interesting in this regard, one at the Newberry Library's Center for the History of the American Indian, under the direction of Francis Jennings; and the other conducted by the Smithsonian Institution's National Anthropological Archives Division, headed by Herman Viola.

The Newberry's operation has brought sixteen American Indians from fourteen different tribes to the library for brief periods to study tribal history and culture. It is seeking funds, in conjunction with the American Indian Higher Education Consortium, for a program which would introduce Indian students to the use of research libraries. The Newberry also hopes to find funds for internships for Native Americans in order to train them to be community librarians and archivists.

Although it also is having funding problems, Herman Viola's program at the Smithsonian has done well. Since 1973, many Indians from several different tribes have participated. Their stay at the Smithsonian varied from a week to three months. Clearly, in such a limited time they could not be turned into archivists; but, as Viola says, "Primarily, we introduce them to the surviving vestiges of their tribal history and culture."

Illustrative of my earlier comment about Indians being the most heavily documented group in the American population are the following examples of what members of particular tribes were able to find in the Smithsonian's National Anthropological Archives and nearby collections. A Wintun (an obscure California tribe) was able to locate photographs of his people dating back to the nineteenth century, as well as information on Wintun medicine men and linguistic data on tribal place names.

A Wyandot ventured across Constitution Avenue to the National Archives to find data on her people's removal from Nebraska to Oklahoma. Fifty-four other Indians had a comparable exposure to archival resources. For some of them it was their first contact with such materials, for others it was an opportunity to enrich their limited research experience.

I heartily endorse such programs, recognizing, as I indicated earlier, that it is highly unlikely that such efforts will produce a corps of trained researchers comparable to that which is part of the higher education establishment. But certainly introducing Native Americans to the wealth of materials available on their tribes is a very worthwhile service.

Already a few tribes are manifesting an interest in establishing tribal archives, and a handful have been launched. These tribal archives will never free Native Americans of dependence upon the collections over which non-Indians preside. And for this reason I would like to close with a plea for cooperation and understanding.

I suspect that many archivists do not fully appreciate their power to facilitate or frustrate the researcher, Indian or non-Indian. After working in this field for over a quarter century, I am still dependent to a disturbing degree upon the good will of archivists and librarians. The materials are so varied and vast that the researcher who thinks he knows exactly what is available on his subject is

deluding himself. Only archivists are sufficiently well acquainted with the holdings in their charge to enable researchers to exploit them fully.

Necessary security measures have considerably complicated the researcher's life in the last ten or fifteen years. Lack of access to stack areas and the rationing of materials to the researcher—while understandable in view of the thefts and vandalism—have made researchers even more dependent on archivists than once was the case.

Just the atmosphere generated by the security measures—the feeling that one is under suspicion, if not constant surveillance—is intimidating. And if someone of my experience senses this, what must some Indian feel, venturing for the first time into an archival institution?

I still recall an incident from my graduate school days. Having established squatter's rights in the manuscript room of the Wisconsin Historical Society, I saw virtually everyone who appeared there. Only a few of them do I recall, but one was a Winnebago Indian who showed up a couple of times to see materials the Historical Society held about his tribe.

He was manifestly ill at ease in those alien surroundings. He was out of his element and needed the help and reassurance that only a competent archivist with a deep commitment to service could provide. Fortunately, he was well served at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

As Indians become better aware of the great mass of materials relating to their history, but in archival custody, archivists will be encountering more of them.

Archivists, please remember that you not only have real power over the Indian of history, the Archival Captive, but you can facilitate or frustrate the contemporary Indian's drive for justice in the courts.

And while you are at it, you might remember, in the style of some of the bumper stickers about goat ropers I have seen in Texas, that "Honky Historians Need Love Too."

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