

ALCATRAZ OCCUPATION - Background Reading

During the late 1960s, the small, isolated, rocky island in San Francisco Bay known as Alcatraz had been largely ignored by the public. Home to the notorious federal prison from 1934 until 1963, Alcatraz -- nicknamed "The Rock"-- was still a few years away from being named a National Park and becoming a major tourist attraction in the Bay Area. But on November 20, 1969, the island became the unlikely stage for a landmark event in the Native American rights movement. On that date, 89 Indians -- mostly students from colleges and universities in San Francisco and Los Angeles -- announced they were taking over the island, setting in motion what would become the longest occupation of a federal facility by Native Americans to date.

Although it was essentially a publicity stunt to spotlight issues concerning Native Americans, the occupation of Alcatraz emerged as a defining event in Indian-U.S. relations and as a trailblazing protest that would soon inspire an upsurge in activism across the country.

Out of Patience

During the 1940s and '50s, Native American activism stressed negotiation, compromise and a preference for legal remedies. In addition, protests and resistance against the U.S. government were generally organized and executed by specific tribes and nations and focused on a specific issue, such as fishing rights and other treaty rights violations. The confrontational political climate of the 1960s, however, ushered in a new era of Native American activism led by a band of younger, more radical leaders -- exemplified by the American Indian Movement (AIM), a militant group formed in 1968.

Spurning what they viewed as the more conciliatory approach of some of their elders, these activists denounced the federal government not only for failing to fulfill the promises of its treaties and agreements but also for its ongoing arrogant and condescending manner toward Native people. The 19-month occupation of Alcatraz Island inspired Native Americans across the country to raise their voices for self-determination, autonomy, economic survival and respect for Native culture.

The 1969 occupation was not the first attempt at seizing "the Rock." In 1964, four Sioux Indians claimed the island, citing an 1868 treaty allowing Indians from the reservation to take any "unoccupied land." That occupation lasted only four hours, but the unmet demands made by the Sioux -- the establishment of an Indian university and the right to use the island as a Native American cultural center among others-- greatly influenced the group that took Alcatraz five years later.

"We Hold the Rock!"

On November 20, 1969, eighty-nine Native Americans, led by activist Richard Oakes, seized control of Alcatraz. To announce their action to the world, the dissidents issued the Alcatraz Proclamation. Because the occupying force comprised a diverse Native population -- Sioux,

Blackfoot, Apache, Navajo, Cheyenne and Iroquois were all represented -- the document was signed by "Indians of all Tribes."

"In the name of all Indians ... we reclaim this island for our Indian nations," the proclamation read. "We feel this claim is just and proper, and that the land should rightfully be granted to us for as long as the rivers run and the sun shall shine. We hold the Rock!"

In exchange for the island, the inhabitants offered "\$24 in glass beads and red cloth," which they said was a precedent set by the white man's purchase of "a similar island" three centuries earlier. While the activists noted that \$24 for the 16 acres on Alcatraz was more than what Whites paid for Manhattan Island, they acknowledged that "land values have risen over the years."

Media coverage and public reaction to the capture were initially sympathetic, and several celebrities, including Jane Fonda, Marlon Brando and Dick Gregory, visited the island to offer support. The inhabitants constructed tipis, and hand-painted slogans -- "You Are on Indian Land," "Red Power," and "Human Rights, Free the Indians" -- adorned the walls of the island's structures.

Preferring not to inflame the situation, the federal government followed a "hands-off" policy regarding the occupation. Although they negotiated with the leaders, authorities hoped that the dissidents would tire and elect to end the occupation voluntarily. Indeed, over the next 12 months, many of the activists would leave the island as bickering between leaders increased and public interest dwindled. By 1971, the occupying force on Alcatraz was reduced to a mere handful of men, women and children. In June 1971, on orders from President Richard Nixon to bring the 19-month occupation to an end, federal marshals escorted the last group of Native Americans off the island.

The legacy of the Alcatraz occupation was immediate and long-lasting. In subsequent months, Native Americans would occupy federal facilities in Colorado, Mt. Rushmore and Ellis Island. In 1972, the Trail of Broken Treaties caravan converged on Washington, D.C., to demand from Congress changes in how Native peoples were treated. The following year, AIM activists occupied the Sioux Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, the site of the Wounded Knee Massacre in 1890. The origins of this era of Indian activism, a milestone in the Native American movement, can be traced back to November 1969.

"The most lasting result of Alcatraz," said Native American activist Adam Fortunate Eagle, "may have been the growth of Indian pride throughout the country. ... Everywhere American Indians rejoiced."

ALCATRAZ OCCUPATION - The Letter

December 16, 1969

Dear Brothers and Sisters:

This is a call for a delegation from each Indian nation, tribe or band from throughout the United States, Canada, and Mexico to meet together on Alcatraz Island in San Francisco Bay, on December 23, 1969, for a meeting to be tentatively called the Confederation of American Indian Nations (CAIN).

On November 20, 1969, 78 Indian people, under the name "Indians of all Tribes," moved on to Alcatraz Island, a former Federal Prison. We began cleaning up the Island and are still in the process of organizing, setting up classes and trying to instill the old Indian ways into our young.

We moved onto Alcatraz Island because we feel that Indian people need a Cultural Center of their own. For several decades, Indian people have not had enough control of training their young people. And without a cultural center of their own, we are afraid that the old Indian ways may be lost. We believe that the only way to keep them alive is for Indian people to do it themselves.

While it was a small group which moved onto the island, we want all Indian people to join with us. More Indian people from throughout the country are coming to the island every day. We are issuing this call in an attempt to unify all our Indian Brothers behind a common cause.

We realize that there are more problems in Indian communities besides having our culture taken away. We have water problems, land problems, "social" problems, job opportunity problems, and many others.

And as Vice President Agnew said at the annual convention of the National Congress of American Indians in October of this year, now is the time for Indian leadership.

We realize too that we are not getting anywhere fast by working alone as individual tribes. If we can gather together as brothers and come to a common agreement, we feel that we can be much more effective, doing things for ourselves, instead of having someone else doing it, telling us what is good for us.

So we must start somewhere. We feel that if we are going to succeed, we must hold on to the old ways. *This is the first and most important reason we went to Alcatraz Island.*

We feel that the only reason Indian people have been able to hold on and survive through decades of persecution and cultural deprivation is that the Indian way of life is and has been strong enough to hold the people together.

We hope to reinforce the traditional Indian way of life by building a Cultural Center on Alcatraz Island. We hope to build a college, a religious and spiritual center, a museum, a center of ecology, and a training school.

We hope to have the Cultural Center controlled by Indians, with the delegates from each Indian nation and urban center present for the first meeting on December 23, and at future meetings of the governing body.

We are inviting all our brothers to join with us on December 23, if not in person, then in spirit.

We are still raising funds for Alcatraz. The "Alcatraz Relief Fund" is established with the Bank of California, Mission Branch, 3060 16th Street, San Francisco, California 94103, and we are asking that donations of money go to the bank directly.

Many Indian Centers and tribal groups from throughout the country have supported the people on Alcatraz by conducting benefits, funded [sic] drives, and so forth. We are deeply appreciative of all the help we have received, and hope that all Indian people and people of good will, will join us in this effort.

We are also asking for formal resolutions of support from each organized Indian tribe and urban center. We can have great power at the bargaining table if we can get the support and help of all Indian people.

We have made no attempts at starting a hard and fast formal organization. We have elected spokesmen because someone has had to be a spokesman. We feel that all Indian people should be present or represented at the outset of a formal national Indian organization.

We have also elected a Central Council to help organize the day-to-day operation of the Island. This organization is not a governing body, but an operational one.

We hope to see you on December 23rd.

- Indians of All Tribes