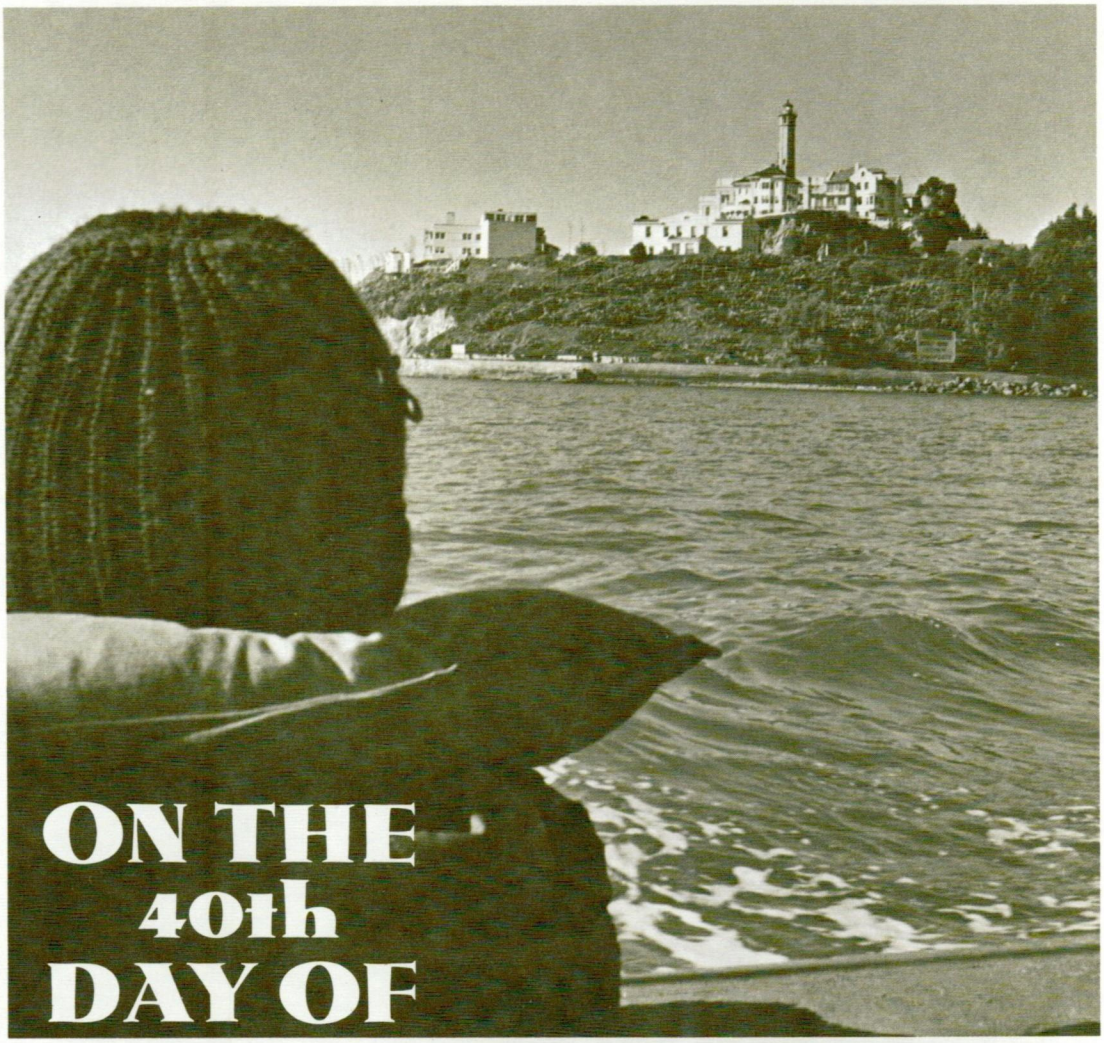

ON THE 40th DAY OF INDIAN OCCUPATION OF ALCATRAZ ISLAND

Text by Ray A. March
Photos by Steven A. Gann

"Indian Property," "Red Power," "Indians Welcome" and "Indian Land" all greet the visitor to San Francisco's Alcatraz Island, and if you're not even a little bit Indian you begin to wish you were!

At the barge-like landing we signed a security register and stepped ashore. On the left was a bonfire, and its smoke curled upwards, passing in front of another huge sign which read "Indians Welcome, United Indian Property – Indian Land." The government sign under the red paint once declared "United States Property."

Then we were in the midst of a totally isolated occupation that has no comparison. Unlike the turmoil of campus confrontations, contrary to the conflicts of civil rights marches, this Indian demonstration was hardly that at all.

No one is admitted on Alcatraz


Glassaire
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DOZEN
IS MY LAND

". . . some ugly stories of inhumanity come down to us. Perhaps the cruelties of our Indian-killers were not as cold-blooded or scientifically planned as those of the Nazis. But they were brutally effective for all that. We did not put Indians in gas chambers or crematories. But we did shoot down defenseless men, women and children at places like Camp Grant, Sand Creek and Wounded Knee. We did feed strychnine to red warriors. We did set whole villages of people out naked to freeze in the iron cold of Montana winters. And we did confine thousands in what amounted to concentration camps."

from the preface to
"The Indian Wars of the West"
By Paul I. Wellman

With this mood, the occupation of Alcatraz Island by a small band of Indians seems to be a mild form of demonstration indeed. The Indians, their numbers generally less than 200 strong, hardly need to remind themselves of an inglorious past, but in doing so they create a motivation which could lead to a national tribalism unequaled in their history.

Tribalism, or nationalism, is relatively new to the American Indian. The idea was conceived in the late 1950's when the first major influx of Indians left their reservations for the college campuses, and it was born in the early 1960's through the efforts of those same students.

What distinguishes the occupation of Alcatraz from other Indian demonstrations, such as the armed fish-ins of Washington State or the Sioux who marched in the 1967 New York City "Peace Parade," is that Alcatraz is a tangible symbol of available land held by the federal government. And for the Indians, who believe the federal government took away their land, symbolism means a great deal.

The Rock, weather-beaten and weary from political and public punchings, is the catalyst to which the Indians now cling for survival through unification. At issue is the Indians' demand for an inherent right of self-government and the right of sovereignty. The motivation toward this goal is the occupation of Alcatraz and the establishment of an Indian Cultural Center reflecting the heritage of all tribes.

At this point in time it is mere conjecture as to what may be accomplished by the occupation if the Indians do not organize themselves enough to create an individual leader or effective guiding council – a move alien to the Indian because it smacks of the Great White Father methods. Somehow, in spite of having traditional tribal chiefs, the new Indian today seems intent on not creating a political ladder for someone

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without the written approval of the main office, and even then the only non-Indians allowed are members of the press. A spokesman for the Indians, a girl in her 20s, pointedly seeks news coverage which will be sympathetic, but she is not insistent.

With the exception of the first attempts to land on the island, there had been no confrontation with the public or with government officials. It was merely an occupation, while the serious negotiations were taking place on the mainland.

As a result, constant occupation of Alcatraz is removed from general public view – not even the hilltop dwellers of San Francisco can penetrate the prison interiors for brief glimpses of Indians through high powered binoculars.

And when you are on The Rock, you are caught up with its new inhabitants, always looking for clues to a fuller meaning of their demonstration, and you are aware that their complaints are far removed from the usual trends which have become familiar to all social levels of America.

Indian spokesmen are quick to point out their occupation of Alcatraz has no similarity to the Negro's battle for civil rights. And there is no evidence to the contrary. This is an Indian matter, but it is no longer just the business of the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

Perhaps one of the most significant symbols of what the Indians are saying was found on the needled branches of a Century plant decorated as a Christmas tree. Numerous tops of tin cans hung from the prickly cactus tree and on each lid words were printed in reference to historical Indian events – all reflecting on governmental advantages over the Indian.

"Wounded Knee" renewed the massacre of an estimated 200 Indian men, women and children by the 7th Cavalry in 1890. "Kinzua Dam" was a symbol of the Indians losing their *land* through a government water project and "Pyramid Lake" was an Indian example of losing *water*. "As Long As The Grass Shall Grow" was a classic example of what the Indians refer to as ambiguous wordage in historical land and peace treaties.

Three decades ago Oliver La Farge wrote an essay titled "As Long As The Grass Shall Grow." In it he prophetically made this summation of the Indians' plight (quoted from *The Indian Wars of the West*):

"The picture is hopeful, and unfinished. Perhaps it will never be finished; it may be replaced once more by the old one. For there is always that incalculable force to whom the white men piously refer as the Great White Father, whom the Indians call simply Washington. He is after all, only the composite expression of a hundred and thirty million of us Americans who are all too ready to forget entirely about a handful of people whom once we feared, then conquered, then planned to break."

On this 40th day of occupation the preliminary efforts to organize nearly 200 people were beginning

power-hungry enough to climb. Consequently, it will not be surprising if the occupation of Alcatraz ends short of its goal because of lack of leadership. If this occurs, it can be traced directly to the conflicting tribal heritages involved.

It is, contrary to the old cigar store Indian jokes, a serious matter.

"This is a strong, non-violent, demonstration," emphasized Grace Thorpe, daughter of Jim Thorpe, All-American athlete and Sac and Fox Indian. "This establishes that the Indian has taken the initiative for the first time in 150 years."

Taking the initiative against the federal government is precisely what has occurred at Alcatraz. Almost immediately after the "initial invasion," as some Indians refer to the occupation, all government agencies adopted a hands off policy. The sway of public opinion was in the balance. In fact, on the 40th day of occupation only the Indians were granting permission to visit the island, not the U. S. General Services Administration, which normally handles such matters.

But while negotiations take place on the Mainland (Indian headquarters are at 4339 California Street in San Francisco), where basic organization of the demonstration is formed, the daily trials and tribulations of the occupation are being experienced by those actually keeping house on The Rock.

Mrs. Stella Leach, registered nurse and member of the Indian Council.

to take effect. At nearly every turn there were bulletin boards instructing the reader to save water, keep the rest rooms clean, when to eat, maintenance procedures — and, of course, the bumper sticker on the wall: "Custer Had It Coming." An Indian, or anyone else, couldn't forget why he was there even if he wanted to.

Judy Scraper, a Shawnee from Shawnee, Oklahoma, is one of two women on the island's Indian Council. She has a major responsibility of overseeing the operation of the kitchen which feeds everyone on the island. All meals are served in the mess hall of the former main cell block. While individual families have their privacy in their daily lives, they do share a communal kitchen and regulated bathing facilities.

A major problem faced by the Indians occupying Alcatraz, aside from the daily needs of fresh foods, medical supplies and moral support, is the regulation of admitting new arrivals. At this writing there were no restrictions except that everybody must be Indian.

"If you want to eat, you have to work, that's my theory," explained Miss Scraper, who has the chore of recruiting workers for garbage, clothing, housing and sanitation committees. Her average day is spent barely keeping ahead of the meals. "By the time we finish work after one meal, it's time to start on the next," she said.

The water pressure on the island is so low that only one faucet in the kitchen works, when at one time there were six. It takes 20 minutes to fill a large cooking pot. Two heaters keep the limited water supply hot.

Sharing in Miss Scraper's theory to enforce regulations on those coming to Alcatraz is Grace Thorpe, a newcomer herself and now representing the Indians to the press. "I cooked all day once when the regular cook was injured in an accident. It was good, at least they ate every bite."

Another problem is the daily task of recruiting volunteer workers.

"It's an eternal problem . . . sweeping, mopping, scrubbing. Who's going to do the dishes? When we ask that they all run," Miss Thorpe said with a tinge of humor behind her age-old question.

Two more signs were prominent on the walls of the mess hall. One pleaded "Help Needed Tomorrow," and another sought a cook's aide. Both asked for volunteers to sign up, but how reliable is their response is an unanswered question.

Our next stop was the medical clinic and on the way we passed through the long, narrow corridor of the former main cell block. On each side little iron masked cubicles sat in darkness, half hidden reminders of The Rock's former inmates.

"It's a riot to see the kids play in the cells," Grace Thorpe commented to no one in particular, as if to break an embarrassing pause. Certainly another kind of riot than the prisoners of the past ever envisioned.

The overpowering atmosphere of

the prison row prompted an obvious question to which Miss Thorpe answered:

"Indians don't steal, generally." She said there had been no problem of theft on the island but did reveal that a pair of her white, thermo socks were stolen from her room while $150 worth of turquoise jewelry was left behind.

For the safety and welfare of the Indian islanders, a security staff has been created to insure that no one is on Alcatraz without permission and that the Indians do not set up housekeeping in buildings structurally unsafe or where there would be an invasion of privacy already existing. Conceivably, it could be a source for political campaigning considering the power structure it potentially represents.

YA-TA-HEY! speaks the sign in the background. Welcome in Navajo.

At the medical clinic we met the other female member of the Indian Council — Mrs. Stella Leach, a Colville-Sioux and registered nurse on a leave of absence from the All Indian Well Baby Clinic in Oakland.

She is nurse to all the Indians on the island, and particularly to the estimated two dozen children. Her office hours are 24 hours a day in spite of a sign on the door declaring "Dr. is in at 2 p.m."

Mrs. Leach has been on the island since the second day of the occupation, following her son, David, who was with the original landing party.

"All I had with me was a first aid kit," she said. "I was afraid they might have accidents."

Just how much longer she will remain on the island is doubtful. She is quite frankly looking for the day when she can leave and return to her normal work.

"This is a kind of freaky place for nurses," she said, referring to the total lack of an antiseptic atmosphere induced by the usual medicines and white uniforms found in waiting rooms and hospitals. She was dressed in a heavy sweater and jeans, obvious garments designed for keeping warm on a winter morning rather than for creating a sterile environment.

But her chances of returning to the Mainland, perhaps reluctantly, appeared slim on this 40th day. One reason was her possible emergence as a spokesman for the Indians, and the other equally important — staffing of volunteer nurses had been a problem. "A couple of white girls came over but they couldn't cope with it," she said.

Although the medical clinic is ill-heated (a portable heater stood in the middle of the little room) and is housed in the inadequate former living quarters of the prison physician, efforts are made to maintain regular preventative medicine precautions. Head inspections are made regularly, medical history files are kept on all patients, and volun-

teer doctors come to the island every day of the week.

"A perfectly professional setup," she said.

But medical problems are apparently becoming an increasing concern on Alcatraz. In the first five weeks one Indian girl required emergency evacuation with possible pneumonia, and a visitor from the outside was sent back to the Mainland when it was thought he was passing kidney stones, according to Mrs. Leach.

In the sixth week 12-year-old Yvonne Oakes, daughter of one of the Indian spokesmen Richard Oakes, fell three stories down a stairwell. She died Jan. 8 following a brain surgery attempt to save her

No direct communication with San Francisco exists for the Indians on the island, but in the event of an emergency a shortwave radio is available in the caretaker's building still maintained by the federal government.

What must be kept in constant check is the daily health of the children, whose ages range from two months to 14 years. The Rock, particularly with its absence of heat, does not provide the most ideal climate. The winds off San Francisco Bay, even on a good day, are biting cold. But in all, the general health conditions were described as "good" by Mrs. Leach.

Guarded optimism prevails on Alcatraz, not only at the medical clinic but also educationally – at least by their own standards and conditions. And unique efforts are being made to give the children a form of education.

"It's a combination of Montessori, Summer Hall and our thing," explained Douglas Remington, a Southern Ute who holds a master's degree in theater arts and languages from Boston University.

He is the coordinator of school instruction on Alcatraz and is assisted by Linda Aranaydo, a Creek from Oklahoma and a senior at UC at Berkeley. It is Miss Aranaydo whom Remington credits for establishing the theme of the school, although he came to the island just three days after reading about the occupation in Madrid, Spain, where he was a student at the Nationale University.

There is a recently published book titled "The New Indian." In it the author, Stan Steiner, describes the new Indian as ". . . the scholarly voice of the university educated, twentieth-century Indians. The quiet voice of the college Indians, articulate and confident . . ."

Remington fits this description perfectly. He is confident, intelligent and articulate. He has bridged one of the most difficult chasms for Indians to cross – the gap between tribal heritage and the "no man's land" of the university campus. Undoubtedly his desires to create a school of "free permissiveness with a certain amount of regimentation," as he calls it, is a reaction to crossing that chasm. Education for the Indian children must be in the relaxed terms of their heritage, or "do our thing."

Remington's office, which actually looks like it may have been an office during the prison days, is located in the front of the main cell block. Like the occupation demonstration going on around it, there

Indian men get a form of recreation and relaxation by playing basketball in a prison courtyard of Alcatraz.

Interior view of a makeshift living area. This one is particularly well organized with bits of furniture and a rug on the floor.

is a certain deceptiveness about his office, or perhaps the books, newspaper clippings and bumper sticker on the wall are all part of a free expression education.

A few books, half of which look like they were left over from a Salvation Army sale, line the top shelf of a bookcase next to the only window — books ranging from Reader's Digest condensations, "A Choice Not An Echo" and "Where I Stand" to "Indian Education, 1969, parts one and two." But the knowledge for teaching isn't restricted to that particular shelf.

Accreditation under California State law is being applied for, and Remington, hopeful for approval, has established the regimentation portion of the school program. Three hours of academics are taught in the mornings and arts and crafts are scheduled for each afternoon. In addition, there is individual tutoring for the youngsters such as a nature hour to "watch the seals go by." Strong efforts are made to orient classes to nature.

Classes normally start at 9:30 a.m., but the Indian's sense of timing is probably best illustrated by the fact that there are only about four watches on the island!

"Actually, they drift in from about 9:30 to 10:00 a.m.," Remington admitted. But if the regimentation is somewhat flexible, the ratio of an average of three credentialed teachers to 24 students is enviable and the reportedly rare absenteeism is remarkable.

Christmas vacation was in progress and some of the children were not on the island on this 40th day. Consequently there was no visit to the makeshift classroom located in the caretaker's building facing the San Francisco side.

However, many of the children of the island were scattered about the decaying grounds and buildings doing the seemingly nothings that little boys and girls do to occupy themselves.

Four boys, all about equal age, straddled a high rock seawall, eating flowering wild grass as the waves washed the small beach more than 80 feet below. Behind them, painted on yet another prison wall, were the Navajo words "YA-TA-HEY!" Welcome.

"Want some grass," one of the boys offered.

"No, thanks."

"You can have some."

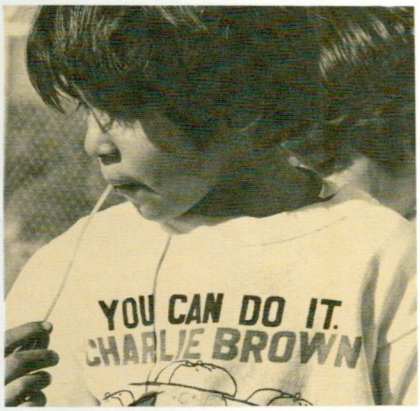
"Thanks. How old are you?"

"Twenty-four, I mean eight?"

"What tribe do you belong to?"

"Pomo. You can talk to me anytime," he added as a kind of welcoming gesture.

His dark hair spilled across his forehead and his dark eyes brightened as he talked. He was just like the boy down the street, or up the hill, or perhaps he was more like the boy on a Mississippi raft adventure. He had confidence in himself and he spoke articulately, and



as if that wasn't enough the white sweatshirt he wore offered additional support.

"You can do it, Charlie Brown," said the inscription across his chest.

They only hope it won't take as long as the grass shall grow. ■

RAY A. MARCH, 35, former newspaperman and now a freelance journalist, has covered such major events as the Freedom Fighters escaping to West Germany during the Hungarian revolt of 1956, and the controversial termination of the federally-controlled bracero program in 1964.

STEVEN A. GANN, 28, is a freelane photojournalist who covered the Viet Nam war in 1968 and the Middle East War between Israel and Egypt in 1969.