



1942-1972

ALCATRAZ IS NOT AN ISLAND

RICHARD OAKES, THE AUTHOR OF THIS ARTICLE, WAS SHOT TO DEATH ON SEPTEMBER 20, 1972 (SEE PAGE 36). A MOHAWK INDIAN, OAKES HAD BEEN A LEADER OF THE OCCUPATION OF ALCATRAZ BY "INDIANS OF ALL TRIBES" IN THE FALL OF 1969. HE SET DOWN THE FOLLOWING ACCOUNT OF THE ALCATRAZ EXPERIENCE SHORTLY AFTER HE LEFT THE ISLAND.

I grew up on the St. Regis Reservation in New York, near the Canadian Border. It's a big reservation, six miles square, with three thousand people and three thousand problems. My growing up was hard, as it is for most Indians. The hopes were there, the promises were there, but the means for achieving them weren't forthcoming. I couldn't adjust.

I went to the schools, went to high school until I was sixteen, but the system never offered me anything that had to do with being an Indian. They didn't teach me how to hunt, how to skin deer, how to tan hides. All they wanted me to do was to become a part of the machinery, to make me into what they wanted: a *white* Indian. I wanted to do something for my people. But I didn't know what.

I quit high school in the eleventh grade and went into iron work. My father and uncle taught me the

trade. They passed it down, and when I was sixteen, I just started working. I worked all over, living on the reservation and off the reservation. I lived in New York, Massachusetts, the New England states . . . I went where the work was. I was an iron worker for eleven years. I made good money, but beyond that there was nothing.

I was working in Newport, Rhode Island when I decided to go out to California. I was building a bridge at that time, working a long shift. I just decided to go to California, gave up everything, and drove right across country. I wanted to come on out and see the world. It was a great experience. On the way, I stopped at other reservations, stopped here and there and saw the different conditions in which the tribes lived. I had done a lot of reading about Indian people when I was back home, but I saw little of what I'd read about.

by richard oakes

PHOTO BY STEPHEN SHAMES

There was a lot of talk about love and friendship for your fellow man, but I never saw it. What I saw instead was the bickering and barroom fights between the Indians, the constant drinking. Drinking seems to fill a void in the life of many Indians. It takes the place of the singing of a song, the sharing of a song with another tribe, the sharing of experiences that another tribe member might have had. Drinking is used as a way to *create* feelings of some kind where there aren't any. It fills a void, that's all. I saw the end of the rainbow, the wrong end.

When I got to San Francisco, I first took a job as a truckdriver. Then I went to work in Warren's Bar as a bartender. Warren's is an "Indian" bar in the Mission District of the city, where many Indians live, and I got familiar with quite a few of the problems down around that area. There was poor housing. The Indian people found that their own culture was inaccessible to them. They were enslaved



by the white economic system and dependent on it in the city, either in the form of welfare or having to work to make someone else rich.

I went to work in a bar, the only sober Indian there. Then I started thinking of going back to school. I had been to Adirondack Community

College and Syracuse University when I was working as an iron worker in Syracuse, so thought that coming to San Francisco might offer me the chance to continue. I got the chance to enroll in San Francisco State College in February of '69. At that time, the college was going through a

The only time I really sat down and talked to Richard Oakes was on a crisp November afternoon a week or so after Alcatraz had been invaded and secured. I was doing a story on the occupation, and had hitched a ride to the island on one of the yachts dodging the Coast Guard's half-hearted *cordon sanitaire* to run supplies to the Indians. That was almost exactly three years ago, but I can still remember the terrific surge of optimism on the island. Jumping off the boat onto the dock was like stepping sideways in time into a functioning community inhabited by contemporaries, yet recalling somehow days when the Indian was not yet the white man's ward. Some of the people of Alcatraz sat perched on rocks jutting out into the Bay, fishing with handmade lines, others cooked over open fires or dipped food out of a common pot; in the background the sound of drums and nasal songs in Sioux and Kiowa clashed with rock music from portable radios.

Large numbers of Indians were coming to Alcatraz from all over the country, many of them arriving with satchels and sleeping bags the day I was there. Alcatraz was what they'd been waiting for for many years. It was the moment when the red man finally stepped out from under the white bureaucrat's thumb and took control once again over his own life. Old people from reservations all over the country had gotten into desperately rickety pick-ups and driven thousands of miles just to set foot on this new Indian Territory like pilgrims visiting Mecca. But mainly there were young people—those who dreamed up the invasion and those who followed after them. Most of them had lived at least a part of their lives in the big city ghettos and felt that they were in danger of being only second-hand Indians.

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They had grown up between two worlds—the world of their elders, which was dead to them, and the contemporary world where they could live with reconstructed Indian identities not yet born. They had always known there was a problem; Alcatraz was the solution.

Although certain spokesmen had been appointed, this new tribe was officially leaderless, having determined to create a *genuine* Indian community run as in olden times by consensus. But it was clear to me that a young Mohawk, a Richard Oakes, was not only a leader of this movement, but also probably the personification of the spirit of the island. Broad shouldered and husky, wearing a heavy mackinaw to protect against the jagged wind slanting in off the Bay, he had open good looks, an acceptable cockiness, and a crackling smile. Later that day, we escaped to what had once been an exercise yard for the old prison, to talk. We sat there for about an hour, squinting down at the ocean and occasionally getting up to move with the dwindling patches of harsh sunlight. Oakes knew that Alcatraz had become a powerful symbol overnight, but he wanted the seizure to lead somewhere definite. "All my life I've been waiting for something like this," I remember him saying. "It's like being alive for the first time. We've got a toe-hold here, and we're going to spread Alcatraz to wherever there are Indians. Every dirty, lousy reservation is going to become an Alcatraz."

Oakes feared that federal marshals would land any day