



Photo by John Giustina

In Search of an Identity

In today's fast-paced society, American Indians are rediscovering their heritage.

BY ALYSON SIMMONS

Imagine an Oregon with no highways, no cities, no dams. Picture its abundance unmanaged, unchecked, uncontrolled; its rivers alive with steelhead and salmon; its forests dark and silent with old growth.

Is this some fantasy born of the mind of a science-fiction writer? No. This was Oregon less than 200 years ago.

Was this a land without people? No. Living in symbiotic harmony with this lush and plentiful landscape were some 40,000 American Indians. Small tribes of hunting and gathering people lived together bound by strong family ties and a spiritual respect for that unequalled land — a oneness with the earth.

But that was yesterday, before the new society came — a society based on agriculture, on ownership, on taking from the land and storing its wealth in gold and in paper.

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The lobby is empty on this sunny afternoon. Traffic noises filter in from the grimy street. The room is clean and spare. In one corner, display cases sport feather headdresses and beaded goods. A sheepskin wall hanging is beside the door. Painted on it an eagle is silhouetted against an American flag.

The front door swings open, and a group of men come in. One man is wearing shorts and a dirty sweatshirt

with the word Alaska fading on the back. His long black hair falls wildly over his unsmiling face. Another young man has dusty jeans and no front teeth. A third man looks to be in his mid-50s. His face is scarred, and his jet black hair is pulled back into a ponytail that plunges halfway down his back.

The three talk as they wait for the woman to emerge from an inner office. Soon she enters, shuffling the yellow checks in her hands. She calls their names, one by one, and hands them their pay. The day labor program at the Urban Indian Council in Portland has helped these men work for another day.

For many American Indians, programs like this one are the first step to adjusting to city life after leaving reservations. Evelyn Bolme, a Klamath Indian, is the director of the Urban Indian Council's job search workshops. She tries to help in the transition from reservation to urban life.

"A lot of these folks come in from the reservations," Bolme says. "And, because unemployment is really high on the reservations, they come to the urban areas to look for work. And a lot of them don't have the beginning knowledge about how to go about looking for work — contacts, where the jobs actually are. Some don't even have some minimal knowledge, like how to get around the city. Transportation is a tremendous problem."

The Urban Indian Council offers a resume service as well as job search workshops. Bolme also tries to stress the importance of education to the people she works with — either higher education, or at least vocational

schools where they can learn skills to help them survive in an urban setting. "A lot of these folks are loggers, ranchers," she says. "When they come in to an urban area, it's hard to translate that into a job."

Current economic conditions have had a severe backlash on American Indians. It is often ethnic minorities who suffer first when there are not enough jobs to go around. Federal domestic cutbacks have affected many programs that have served American Indians in need.

Warm Springs, located in Central Oregon, is one reservation that does not reflect the high rate of unemployment found in other reservations around the country. Bolme calls it "our jewel."

"That's what we all point our fingers to as a good example of a tribe that's become self-sustaining," she says.

Warm Springs was established by treaty in 1855, bringing together members of various Warm Springs tribes as well as Wasco and Paiute Indians. The economic health of Warm Springs is due in part to its strong timber industry. Along with its mill, Warm Springs has the successful recreational resort Kah-Nee-Tah and a fish hatchery. It is also one of the few Oregon reservations that survived termination.

Termination. An ominous word for a devastating experience to many American Indians. It was an experimental federal policy enacted in the early 1950s that affected a large number of Oregon Indians. Congress contended that Indians needed to be brought into the mainstream of

American society and that by removing the restriction of federal supervision over the tribes, this assimilation process would be accelerated. With the termination bills, all federal services were ended and all tribal lands were sold, and 12,000 American Indians in eight states lost their federal status.

The end result of the termination policy was the removal of many American Indians from the land base that had kept their heritage alive. Once their reservations were closed, their tribes had no legal standing. Many people were greeted with discrimination as they searched for a means to lead independent lives.

Much American Indian culture already had been lost in the mid-1800s when various treaties forced them onto reservations. Traditionally, Oregon tribes were small and diverse. There were originally 21 separate languages and more than 40 different dialects spoken. When tribes were moved onto reservations, they were forced to live together where their cultures mixed and often came into conflict. Other tribes were split up and assigned to different reservations.

In dividing tribes, families often were separated, sometimes thousands of miles apart. To a culture whose social structure was based on family and kinship, this was a devastating blow. Still, common beliefs and experience tied the people of the reservations together. When their tribes were terminated, Indians were forced to once again break social ties and move to find a livelihood.

Bolme says "termination was a real destructive thing to the Indians. It's a

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