

## Why Some Americans Won't Be Celebrating Columbus Day

By Tracy Olson

October 12th marks the 500th anniversary of Christopher Columbus' discovery of the New World. Most people I know, however, are not calling it a discovery. I refer to it simply as a voyage, a journey, or an expedition. Or maybe a long, long, long trip. I do agree that Columbus was very interested in travel and discovery. I agree with the fact that he got the *Nina*, *Pinta*, and *Santa Maria* and some men together and sailed across the ocean. I agree with the fact that he eventually landed on a sizable hunk of land we now know as America. But when it is said that Columbus *discovered* America----here I must disagree.

The word *discovery* implies that the Americas were uninhabited when Columbus arrived, except for vegetation and wildlife. The truth is, there were entire civilizations existing for centuries on this new continent, perfectly content without the benefit of European culture. We can, however, say Columbus achieved a success that was thoroughly unmatched for his time. After all, he did sail a quarter-way around the world. We have all heard the stories about how many people believed that nothing else existed west of Europe. Many thought Columbus would be eaten by sea monsters. And yes, maybe there were a few who thought he would fall off the edge of the Earth.

But how can one man discover a very large continent that has already been the homeland for thousands of people for many years? Columbus didn't discover America. He discovered a civilization that happened to be different from his own. That certainly didn't give him the right to claim that land, to name it, to set the wheels in motion for a systematic process that would eventually claim the lives of many Indians and rob them of the only life-style they've ever known. History has dictated for generations that Christopher Columbus was a great man, a hero. Can you imagine what would have happened if the situation were reversed?

What if a group of the first Native Americans (the Aztecs and Incas), got together, built a ship, and embarked on a journey across the endless ocean, just to see if there was anything on the other side? Or indeed, if there was another side? Imagine them sailing for days, maybe even months, until finally, they see what might be a faint glint of land miles off in the distance. Upon arriving on that piece of land the Aztecs and the Incas obviously could see they were in a place very different from America. The leader of the ship surveys the people and the land and records the historic day in his personal journal.

The leader then instructs his men to look around and help themselves to whatever they need, and formally declares that land to be a possession of America.

If the *discovery* happened this way, history would have recorded a great tragedy perpetrated upon the Europeans. When talking about Columbus, it doesn't seem so tragic. Why was he portrayed this way? More importantly, why aren't Native Americans outlined accurately in history? In school, I never learned how millions of Native Americans were enslaved, had their children and homes taken away, and were forced to live in the shadow of a foreign culture. I never learned that Europeans were the people who introduced alcohol and diseases such as smallpox into the tribes. And I definitely never learned about the Indian way of life, and how to them, the rich, plentiful soil and water they lived on was sacred.

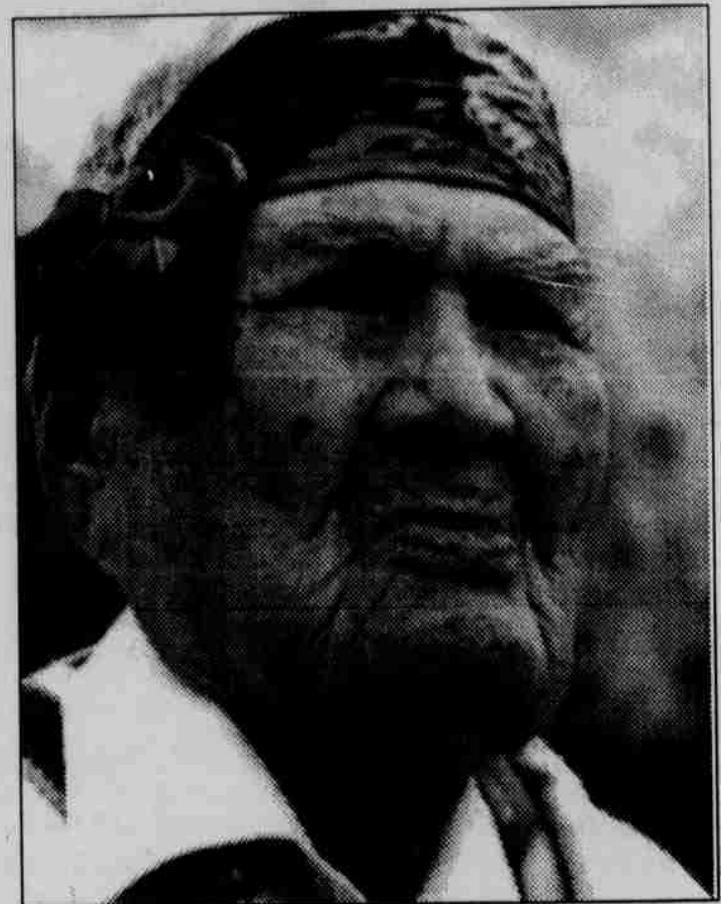
We must define the understanding all Americans should have for Indian Nations across the country, the future role Columbus' voyage will play in American education, and realize that no matter who gets blamed, 500 years ago something very wrong happened.

## "Surviving Columbus" Illustrates 450-Year Pueblo Indian Struggle to Save Culture

For the native peoples of the Americas, Christopher Columbus' voyage into their world and subsequent arrival of other Europeans is not a story of discovery and exploration---it is a story of conquest and enslavement. *SURVIVING COLUMBUS*, a documentary special coming to public television Monday, October 12, (OPB 7:p.m.) tells of the Pueblo Indians' 450 years of contact with Europeans and their long and determined struggle to preserve their culture, land, and religion.

Told from the viewpoint of the American Indians, *SURVIVING COLUMBUS* offers a different perspective of the Columbus Quincentary---a perspective on American history that has been omitted from school texts and public consciousness for too long.

The two-hour documentary uses the stories of Pueblo elders, interviews with Pueblo scholars and leaders, archival photographs, and historical accounts to show that the survival of Pueblo Indians was the result of a long struggle by the Pueblo peoples to control their own lives. *SURVIVING COLUMBUS* is the story of the Pueblo Indians told in their voices and seen through their eyes.



*Mecalita Wystalucy, a Zuni tribal elder. Zunis were the first Pueblo tribe to encounter Europeans in present-day America.*

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