

Indian Activists Reunited In Grand Ronde As Elders, Leaders

■ Tribal Elder Beryle Contreras meets with Wilma Mankiller after 30 years apart.

By Toby McClary

In autumn of 1969, thousands of Native Americans occupied the abandoned remains of Alcatraz, a federal penitentiary isolated on an island in San Francisco, California. The occupation, as well as the fight for Native rights, is something that Tribal Elder Beryle Contreras remembers well.

When she was 21, Contreras and her family were relocated by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) from their home in Tillamook to the San Francisco Bay area. Many Native Americans from around the country were also moved to San Francisco, but for Contreras, this may have been one of the most influential moves of her life.

Wanting to be involved in the Native communities that surrounded her, Contreras volunteered her time at the San Francisco Indian Center and the Oakland Inter-Tribal House organizing fundraisers and other events that supported Native American progress. During this time in 1968, Contreras befriended an Indian woman who was also donating time to benefit Tribal communities. The friendship blossomed. The woman's name was Wilma Mankiller.

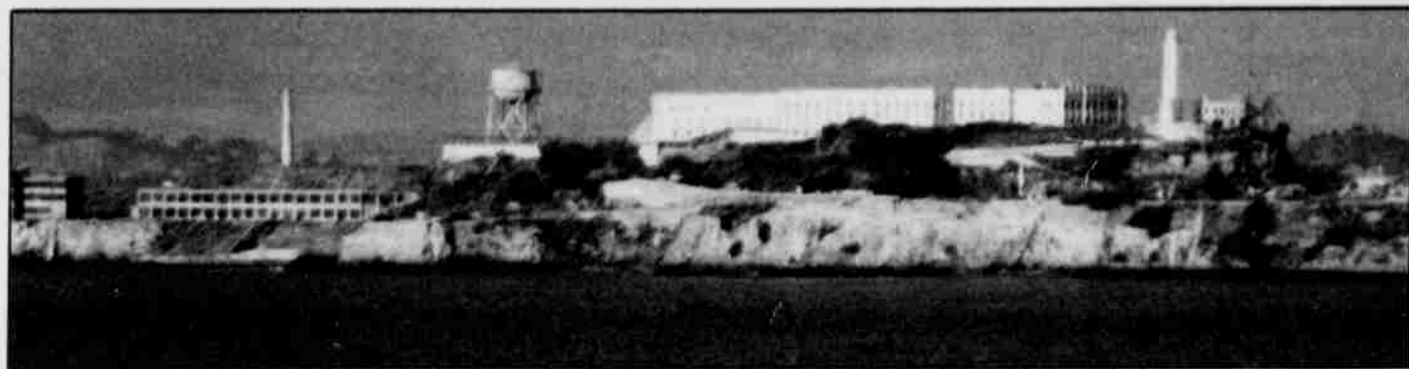
"Wilma and I had a lot in common in those days," said Contreras. "We were both going through some hard times and I guess we kind of commiserated."

As their friendship grew, Contreras and Mankiller attended a lot of the same functions and at one point, they even lived together. They devoted their time to helping members of the Indian communities that were struggling, while all along their bond grew tighter and tighter.

"We would take in a lot of kids from the court," said Contreras, "kids that were considered incorrigible. We just lived and taught them how to live in society."

In late 1969, by way of the "moccasin telegraph" (word of mouth through Indian Country), Contreras and Mankiller heard word of the Alcatraz occupation. With both of them being very intrigued by Tribal issues, they decided to drop what they were doing to help show support.

The 19-month occupation began on November 20, 1969 and lasted until June 11, 1971. Over 5,600 Native



Alcatraz Island in San Francisco Bay

Americans, from all across the country, took part. Some stayed for a day and some stayed for the entire 19 months. Contreras lived three months on the island, going back and forth from the island to town in order to take care of her business.

"One of the fishermen had a boat," said Contreras, "and he transported all of the Indians to the island."

Native American students from the University of California, Berkeley, helped organize the occupation of Alcatraz, making a stand for Indian rights. The thousands of Native Americans that occupied Alcatraz identified with the call for self-determination, sovereignty and respect for Indian cultures. Today, the Alcatraz occupation is recognized as a spearhead of Indian activism. Approximately 74 occupations of federal facilities and private lands followed the Alcatraz occupation and were either planned by or included people of the 19-month protest on Alcatraz.

"Alcatraz was a changing experience for a lot of Indian people," said Contreras. "It gave them a chance to find their identity and relate to what was really happening."

On June 11, 1971, a large force of federal marshals, GSA Special Forces, Coast Guard, and FBI agents removed the final 15 people. There were six men, four women and five children remaining on the island. They offered no resistance, and after 19 months and nine days, the occupation was over.

"For a long time I had known that Indians weren't treated right and I wanted to be Indian," said Contreras. "I didn't want to be anything else and I was willing to fight for it."

After the Alcatraz occupation, Contreras wanted to continue her efforts for a better life for the Indians and thought that furthering her education would be beneficial. She enrolled at San Francisco State University and took general studies for two years. She again met with Mankiller, who was also enrolled there, and they began paving their path to a better Indian Country.

"It was after the occupation that Wilma and I became really close," said Contreras. "It was when we were going to school together and shared some classes together."

Getting an education was just one of the many things on their list of accomplishments. They were attending many board meetings for Indian programs and they also volunteered their time at the Oakland Adult Education Program in 1974. Also in 1974, Contreras, Mankiller and two other "California Indians" opened the Survival School in Oakland.

"We just moved into a great big house, pooled all of our money for the bills and took in kids," said Contreras. "We were doing so much at that time, gosh!"

Contreras remembers a time while attending San Francisco State that her and Mankiller took a whole week off of school and wrote up three proposals for different Indian education programs in Oakland.

"We made good money, but we had to work hard everyday and sometimes into the night to get them done," she said. "I would proofread because Wilma could type more than 80 words a minute. I never seen any-one type like that."

All three proposals were acknowledged and adopted by the state.



Guard Tower on Alcatraz

Contreras and Mankiller continued these ways until each decided they needed to go home in 1977. Contreras moved back to Oregon and Mankiller to Oklahoma.

Both led very busy lifestyles after returning home. Contact between the two was scarce and ultimately they lost contact, though trying on numerous occasions.

Then, on November 29, 2005, after almost 30 years of being apart, Contreras and Mankiller were reunited at the Grand Ronde Community Center. As Mankiller entered the room, Contreras welcomed her at the door with open arms. The two embraced for several minutes, laughing and crying and reminiscing like best friends that had just spent the last three decades apart.

As the two embraced, the emotion took over the room and for a brief second, you could have heard a pin drop.

When remembering Wilma Mankiller, her best friend and one of the most inspiring woman leaders in all of Indian Country, Contreras, with tears filling her eyes, had this to say:

"Wilma was always very sensitive and generous. She was like everybody's mother and everybody's sister. I want to be around her and do things with her again. I believe that we are soul mates. I am so proud of her for all the things she has accomplished."

Contreras and Mankiller exchanged phone numbers and plan to stay in contact. As both of them head in different directions and lead their different lifestyles, they will always hold on to a friendship that has lasted over 30 years. ■



Emotional Reunion — Wilma Mankiller (l) and Grand Ronde Tribal Elder Beryle Contreras meet again after 30 years.

Photo by Brent Merrill

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