

## THE FORGOTTEN AMERICAN

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Hiawatha; Pocahontas; Uncas; Sitting Bull--What is the picture that these names evoke in your mind? Lithe red-brown bodies; black, coarse, straight hair; restless feet in deerskin moccasins; bare-backed ponies racing through the tall grass of the plains and over the wild, rough hills; strange, barbaric dances; bows and arrows! Yes, these are the things we see when we think of the American Indian; these are impressions we gain as we watch their portrayal on television; these are the characters about whom we read in the works of James Fenimore Cooper, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and a score of others. Children play at "cowboys and Indians," and invariably the "cowboys" are the good men who must vanquish the "bad Indians." We buy a feathered headdress, pottery, or gaudy jewelry from a souvenir shop and feel that we have partaken of Indian culture. But is this what the American Indian of today is really like? No, it is no more true than the misapprehension of much of the world that all people in Montana live on ranches and all Texans are millionaires. Our idea of the Indian is just as old-fashioned as hoop-skirts, knee breeches, and stage coaches. The Indian would like to be one of us, to take his place in the modern American community, but unfortunately our treatment of his problems and our attitude toward him is just as old-fashioned as our conception of his race.

Let us review the place the Indian holds in our history, and see if we must not acknowledge the fact that he has been relegated unfairly to the position of a minority group which we must tolerate, but for which we have no enthusiasm or understanding.

When the white men came to North America, they came to colonize, to occupy the land and to get from it all they could. They found it inhabited by a sparse, primitive population which was in the way and, therefore, had to be annihilated or driven back. These white men were not intentionally cruel or heartless, but they saw what they wanted and were determined to get it. They salved their conscience, if they thought about it at all, by assigning to the Indians tracts of land, called reservations. Although the Indians held certain theoretical rights, they were actually wards of the government and subject to arbitrary controls over both personal and public life.

It was not until 1924 that citizenship was granted to the Indians in recognition of their service in World War I. At that time, they became American citizens with the right to local self-government under Federal jurisdiction and with the assurance of Federal responsibility for health and education as long as they remain in their own territory. When they leave the reservation, they are presumed to be of the same status as any other American, but at that point the Indian's legal rights are negated by reality. He usually finds prejudice and discrimination and unequal "justice" before the law. Frequently, he receives a more severe penalty for an offense than does the white man who has committed the same crime. Many communities are frankly segregated. Therefore, the Indian's choice as to whether he should remain in "Indian country" in a modern version of the old life or should go out to seek assimilation into the great American community is not really a free choice since he is seldom given a decent chance.

Consider the case of the young Indian marine who participated in the famed flag-raising on Iwo Jima. He returned to the United States a hero; he was wine and dined and honored. When he returned to the reservation where his family lived and saw the dire need for water to make the land productive, he sought aid for his people. But no one would listen! The very individuals who had praised him turned him away. Finally, he gave up the crusade; he realized at last that to the American people he had only been a symbol of bravery, but he was not a person--he was only an Indian! He died in the gutter--a picture of failure, of disappointment, of despair; a symbol of his people.

In the 1950's, Congress passed the act of "termination." It was simply declared that certain groups of Indians were no longer Indians. What that must have done to their pride, their confidence, their hopes! Of course, no longer being Indians, all their land went out of trust, and their rights as Indians ended. The most important tribes "terminated" were the Klamaths of Oregon and the Minomees of Wisconsin, both of whom coincidentally owned large tracts of valuable timber.

The Indian has been accused of dependency, resentment toward the white man, and frustration. What can we expect? He has been pushed around for about two centuries, has been discriminated against and despised. He had both freedom and a satisfactory life in this country until the white man came and took them from him. In Mari Sandoz's book These Were the Sioux she tells of the old warrior Bad Arm who had seen his wife and children killed by the white soldiers. His attitude reflected more fatalism than bitterness. Miss Sandoz writes, "All life was injustice he thought. Lightning found



the good and the bad; sickness carried no respect for virtue, and luck flitted around like the spring butterfly." Here is the philosophy of a people who have no use for our tears or our pity. What they want is tolerance, reasonable opportunity, and full equality of educational and economic status with the white man. The Indian has been the forgotten element in our population which we have chosen to ignore as much as possible, but we must remember him and accept responsibility for his development.

I am sure that, if asked, almost every person in the United States would express himself as being in favor of just treatment of the original inhabitants of our country. However, a lack of true publicity about Indian affairs has, for years, been a factor working against them; people in general think the Indians are in splendid condition. They read of the few who have oil on their land and assume that all Indians are rich, not realizing that there are close to one-half million others wasted by poverty, hunger, and disease. Much is being done for other minorities in our country: the Mexican laborer is a concern of the Southwest and responsible persons are trying for the enactment of laws for their protection; California searches for better means of dealing with the large Chinese population in some sections; tremendous strides have been made in the past few years in securing for the Negro equal rights, education, and privileges. Where are the law-makers who seek to help the Indian? Where are the voices crying out for his acceptance? Where are the "Freedom Riders" demanding his rights?

What is the answer to his problem? The answer for the Indian can be found only in a more realistic government policy toward him and acceptance, tempered by understanding and tolerance. We must destroy Bad Arm's philosophy that "All life is injustice"; and look to the day when our picture of the Indian is one of a modern, responsible member of society and not one of war paint and feathers, and to the time when our children choose to play the part of the "red.man." We need not destroy his identity: The American Chinese have their "Golden Dragon"; the American Mexicans, their fiestas; The American Irish, their St. Patrick's Day parades. The Indian can remain an Indian, but first of all he must be accepted as an American !