

RACISM ON THE FLATHEAD RESERVATION:

A CORRELATION OF THE CONFEDERATED SALISH & KOOTENAI TRIBES' ABILITY TO EFFECTIVELY SELF-GOVERN

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In this paper, I discuss my perception of racism on the Flathead Reservation in Montana, a reservation jointly occupied by Indians and whites. Focusing on personal experiences of racism from my youth to my present tenure as an employee for the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, I attempt to provide a rational explanation for these experiences. In trying to understand racial tension and animosity one correlate is easily identifiable: as our Tribal Government becomes more assertive in exercising Tribal sovereignty, the opposition heightens. Although it is not our intention to incite xenophobia on the part of whites living on the Reservation, such a condition has developed as we have increased the exercise of our rights to function as a sovereign Indian government. Our ultimate end of self-governance is not designed to destroy our neighbors, but to protect our cultural identity and maintain our integrity as Salish, Kootenai, and Pend d'Oreilles peoples.

There are far too many incidents of racism on this Reservation. Some are even too painful to relate. Throughout my life, I have encountered various forms of racism ranging from children's torment to outright refusal of service in a public establishment because I am an Indian. These experiences pale against incidents where Indians have been viciously accosted, been physically assaulted, or suffered unnecessary deaths due to racism. For brevity sake, I have chosen to write about only some of those experiences that I have personally encountered.

I first became aware that I was an Indian through a very traumatic experience. It happened on the playground of the Linderman Elementary School in Polson, Montana. It was 1967 and I was in First Grade. During recess, my classmates and other children physically attacked me for being what they perceived to be a "dirty Indian" because I frequently wore the same clothes throughout the school week. As I struggled to regain my

footing, I apparently scratched one girl's arm. The girl became hysterical and the others ran to get help. As the playground teacher led the weeping child away, I heard her reassuring the girl that she did not have "Indian germs" but the school nurse would check her anyway. The girl's parents came to get her, and I was punished for fighting.

Until that day I had not even known I was an Indian, let alone diseased. In retrospect, it was through this experience I learned that the act of defending myself would be considered fighting. After that I became acutely aware that I was different. I learned to ignore the ridicule over my appearance, being a recipient of free lunch programs, and receiving what the non-Indians called "free money from the government." Because of our low self-esteem and feelings of inadequacy, we Indian students sought each other out and ran in groups. In our groups, we related to each other and there was a sense of acceptance, something that didn't come easily in the public schools on our Reservation.

By the time I reached my freshman year in high school, most of my best friends had dropped out of school. All of them were quite intelligent and had no problems with academic achievement. But the mental, emotional, and physical abuse in the public school system was too overwhelming for them. Many of my friends have died since that time: two of them took their own lives before they were 18. The others' deaths were caused by car accidents and were usually drug and alcohol related. One of my friends hanged himself in the Missoula jail about five years ago. I suspect there was more to this incident, but suspicious Indian deaths in our part of the country are not uncommon.

As I try to identify various forms of racism, I focus on specific types of confrontations. Although there appear to be various reasons for each occurrence, I believe there are only two basic reasons why the Indians on this Reservation experience discrimination to the extent they do. First of all, and most importantly, it was the Creator who decided where everyone would live. In our case the Creator just happened to select the most beautiful place on Earth as our homeland. The second part of the problem is that those people who choose to live amongst us do not understand, nor will they accept, our good fortune. Instead of trying to understand our worthiness for being bestowed such a great gift and sharing in our appreciation, they apparently want to destroy us and take our land.

Sometimes we take what we know for granted. Others do not understand, nor can they relate to, our Indian philosophies. Most Indians accept that we were all placed in certain parts of the world for a specific reason. The Ksunka, known today as the Kootenai, would explain it in this way: In the beginning of time, the Creator granted everyone a religion. The religion was to be the stronghold and the identity of the people. Through their religion, everyone would have access to spiritual guidance. For the Ksunka, Nupika became our spiritual leader. The Nupika is alive in all the Earth's elements

and dwells in our surroundings. This is why as Indian people, we fight and will continue to fight, to protect our natural resources. By maintaining our homeland's environment and keeping our natural resources intact, we have remained faithful to Nupika. We still have our spiritual guidance and if it were not for this, Ksunka would be extinct. We will never leave this land because we belong to it.

Over the years, the homeland of the Kootenai has been divided into separate counties, states and even countries. A small portion of our homeland is included in the Flathead Indian Reservation. In 1855, the U.S. Government presented our Grandfathers with a proposition which became known as the Hellgate Treaty. The Government offered, in return for our ceding most of our homelands and, for some, virtually all of their homelands, that it would allow us to live in peace. The Government promised that our rights would be protected by the Treaty so that we could continue living our traditional lifestyles, but on a much smaller parcel of land. With the signing of the Hellgate Treaty, the Flathead Indian Reservation was established. It became the homeland of three great Tribes: the Salish, the Kootenai, and the Pend d'Oreilles. A confederacy was formed and is know today as the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes.

The Flathead Reservation encompasses 1,242,969 acres of land and is 80 miles long and 40 miles wide. There are approximately 74,000 surface acres of pristine water on the reservation. The timber base is about 200,000 acres. It was probably more at one time. Our Reservation is rich and abundant in natural resources such as small game, bears, birds, riparian habitat, fish, minerals, natural gases, various species of coniferous and deciduous trees, grasslands, wild fruits and vegetables, and other plants.

I have lived in some of the most prejudiced towns on the Reservation, but if I were to choose the worst of these there would be no contest, and probably every Indian person would agree with me. It is Polson, Montana. Polson is the County seat for Lake County, Montana. Its current population is about 5,700, the majority of the residents are middle-class, non-Indian immigrants who have decided to relocate into this area for its high quality of life. Polson is a tourist resort because of its convenient location on the south end of Flathead Lake. Most of the development around the Lake consists of summer and retirement homes. Over the past four decades this area has experienced an influx of Californians who have decided to make their home here.

Most of these property owners are unaware that they are on an Indian Reservation, and this ignorance is an additional problem. They are ignorant of Indian culture, beliefs, sovereignty, and management styles. For instance, in 1986 I represented the Tribes in meetings and public hearings with city officials and residents of Polson. The Tribes were considering a business development for some of our lakeshore land in Polson. Instead of focusing on the development plan, the mayor of Polson took the opportunity to register a complaint against the Tribes. She felt that the Tribes lacked generosity and

were causing a great financial burden for the community. She pointed out the enormous costs to Polson of policing Indian housing projects, since they did require steady policing. The allegation was inaccurate because the Tribes contribute thousands of dollars on an annual basis in the form of monetary and in-kind contributions, payments in lieu of taxes, rights-of-way, free use of Tribal lands, and other services.

The issue of policing the Reservation is an issue in itself. The Flathead Reservation, to most of our despair, has concurrent jurisdiction with the State of Montana under the operation of Public Law 280. Not surprisingly, the majority of Lake County Jail prisoners are Indians. Lake County boasts that their police are usually the first to respond, but this has prompted allegations by Indians of harassment and entrapment. Indian prisoners in the Lake County Jail allege mistreatment, intimidation, neglect, and outright physical abuse. Presently, Lake County is faced with the problem of over-crowded jail cells and the rising costs of housing prisoners, a condition that heightens charges of disparate treatment and unequal justice for Indians.

After the birth of my son, I decided that as a mother, I was due a little respect from Indians and whites alike. What a rude awakening when I entered Flipper's Billiards in Missoula, Montana, and was refused service because I am Indian and "Indians cause too much trouble." I wasn't even drinking, and the farthest thing from my mind was trouble. I sued the establishment, and the case took four years to get into court. In the meantime, I began documenting cases of people who had been denied service because of their race. Most of the Indians who would sign an affidavit for me would not consider a suit of their own, and they all refused to appear in court with me. It seemed that some of them thought they deserved that treatment. I could not believe one woman, who was the same age as my mother and well established in the community, refusing to deal with the situation on an official level.

Once I took a drunk friend who had been stabbed to St. Pat's Hospital in Missoula and begged for help. Rather than sending me a doctor, hospital personnel called the police. The police said they could help my friend only if I spoke to the Missoulian reporter who was also called on the scene. In the meantime, my friend had fallen off the operating table and was bleeding all over the floor. I refused to speak to the reporter and helped my wounded friend out of the hospital to another hospital, where he was promptly treated.

I think for the most part Missoula is accepting the Indian community more and more. I was involved in a Census project a few years back. I had to consult with each county that has lands on the Reservation. By way of contrast, Lake County demanded that I accept the geographical boundaries that it had identified, while Missoula County passed an ordinance giving the Tribes full zoning jurisdiction for Missoula County land that lay within the Reservation boundary. This discrepancy really caused a stir in Lake County,

which released a statement to Missoula County condemning it for its actions.

Lake County and its residents continue to refuse to accept the fact that we are a sovereign nation. One of the most active Indian opponents, who spent most of his time in office harassing the Tribes, was recently voted out of his County Commissioner seat. Everyone who knew the man realized that he was self-destructive. In a final attempt to defy Tribal jurisdiction, he staged the media event of the year. On the day our Tribal 44D hunting and fishing regulations were to go into effect, he invited the public, along with reporters, to watch him fish in the Ninepipe Reservoir right off Highway 93.

Understanding clearly that Tribal regulations required all non-Indians to possess a Tribal permit while fishing on the Reservation, he opted not to purchase one. The man's display of unprofessionalism and lack of ethics has now got him begging for write-in ballots come election day. I'm not sure if it has even occurred to him that he will be splitting Republican votes, thereby helping the Democratic candidate to a sure win. As irony would have it, the Democrat is a Tribal member who once served as a very loyal Executive Secretary to the Tribes.

In my position with the Tribes I have observed many racial incidents. Many of these encounter involve lawsuits, political protests, legislative appeals, and the news media. The reasons for our Tribes' involvement in these issues remain unclear, except for our opposition to the anti-Indian forces that seem to surface every time we deal with an issue. It almost seems ludicrous that our Indian Government is forced to retain five attorneys simply to carry out our day-to-day operations. Defending our existence as Indian Tribes on a daily basis is not only time-consuming but also physically, psychologically and financially exhausting. Somehow, and it defies understanding, the news media in this area always manage to place Indians in a bad light at the forefront of controversy.

As if our water-rights, hunting, and regulation-enforcement battles were not enough to keep the Tribes occupied, we Tribal members, with the leadership of our Council, have decided to explore new innovations in self-governance. We have successfully entered into direct-service (638) contracting with the federal government to provide services ranging from education to electronics. Recently, we were successful in contracting our power utility on the Reservation. In approximately 27 years, ownership of Kerr Dam, the largest hydroelectric power generator in Western Montana, will revert to the Tribes. Our management and administration of Mission Valley Power is one step in preparation for the ultimate buy-back of the dam.

None of this progress has been easy for us, and it has not happened quickly. We fought long and hard legal and political battles to achieve our current level of self-governance. Recently, Montana Senator Melcher visited our reservation. He has been a major opponent of Indian self-determination, and his visit was not congratulatory. Instead, Senator Melcher staged his ever familiar stand against the Flathead Tribes, playing Indian off against non-

Indian in an apparent quest for votes. He identified the Tribes as the reason for the stagnating economy, he condemned us for exercising our sovereignty, and argued that we have caused property values to decline on the reservation. Not once did he commend us for doing anything positive. Senator Melcher has chosen to ignore the concessions we have made and all of our contributions that make this country great, specifically the State of Montana. In this regard, Melcher is typical of non-Indian politicians who prey on the fears and anxieties of non-Indian voters at the expense of Indian self-determination.

As we struggle to flourish on the Flathead Reservation, we are aware that all of the injustices we experience are directly related to our progress as an Indian Tribe. We know that in order to protect and preserve our cultural identity we must continue to exercise our rights to self-determination to the fullest extent possible. The social, political, and economic injustices on this reservation will subside only after we have addressed them. In accordance with the theme of the 1988 Affiliated Tribes of Northwest Indian' Annual Conference, we are merely exercising our rights as a nation, in hopes of maintaining our homelands and traditions through effective tribal self-governance.

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THE FOURTH WORLD DOCUMENTATION PROJECT

A service provided by
The Center For World Indigenous Studies
www.cwis.org

Originating at the Center for World Indigenous Studies,
Olympia, Washington USA

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