

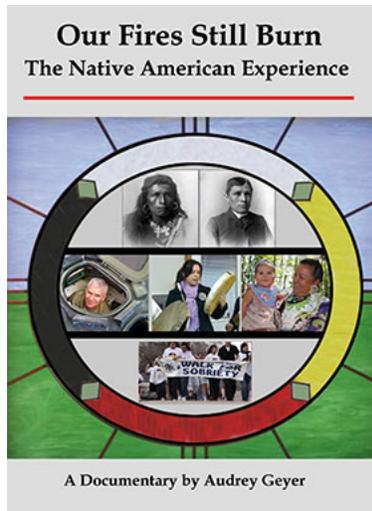
Film Review

Our Fires Still Burn - The Native American Experience A one hour documentary (2013)

Executive Producer/Director: Audrey Geyer
Co-Producer: Levi Rickert

Dr. John Caruso, Jr.
Media Reviews Editor

In one hour, film maker Audrey Geyer captures 500 years of history of the Three Fires Confederacy that includes the Ojibwe (Chippewa), Odawa (Ottawa), and Odawatomí (Potawatomi) Tribal Nations who live near the Great Lakes of Michigan, Superior, and Huron in the US and Canada. The setting and story reflect the hopes and accomplishments of Tribal/Native Americans who faced, fought, and overcame cultural genocide. The forced removal and relocation policies (1790-1920) of the US Federal government stripped the tribes of their homelands and their ways of life and restricted them to living on reservations. Eventually the government subjected their children to forced acculturation in Federal boarding schools designed to remove the Indian culture, thus saving the child. The self-narrated film unfolds in 12 chapters, each one being the life story of survival. Video director Geyer chronicles attempts to eradicate the three tribes, their resistance, and their renaissance. The story concludes with the medicine wheel, a representation of the health of a people aligned with Mother Earth and the Great Spirit.



The film begins with graphic images of the massacres of Tribal Americans during the last stage of the Great Indian Wars (1867-1890) after the US Civil War (1861-1865). Not content with destroying the New England tribes and the Trail of Tears in the South following the Indian Removal Act of 1830, the Federal government supported Manifest Destiny, a “White” crusade to win the West and repopulate the frontier from the Mississippi to the Pacific Northwest with White immigrants.



When Columbus arrived (1492) in the Caribbean, there were approximately five million Tribal Americans in North America. At the end of the Great Indian Wars in 1890, only 250,000 survived. Most of the survivors were exiled to desolate federal reservations, stripped of their livelihood, and turned into self destructive welfare-dependent wards of the US Bureau of Indian Affairs established in 1824 as part of the War Department.

I. Living in Two Worlds

The first chapter of the film shares the life experiences of members of the Saginaw Chippewa and other tribes. The Chippewa own the Isabella Reservation next to Mt. Pleasant, approximately 70 miles north of Lansing, Michigan. As a child, Scott Badenoch learned to live in two worlds. In the summer he was an Indian boy on the Lac du Flambeau reservation, and for the rest of the year he lived in River Forest, an affluent suburb of Chicago. He loved the summer activities of fishing, gathering berries, and playing in the woods with his Indian uncle who took him fishing and camping. The same uncle became a mean drunk after lunch time and physically abused those around him. Scott learned the Tribal stories of creation, lullabies, music, and dance. His mother, a Ho-chunk Winnebago, was torn between two worlds and later in life experienced bouts of alcoholism. During her depression she tore up hundreds of family photos. For Scott this act of ripping photos in half represented her anguish of being torn apart and living in two worlds, Native and White.

Lee Ruffino grew up in a single-parent family after her dark-skinned Indian father left home. Her White mother could not continue Native cultural education for Lee. Lee felt abandoned and fell into drugs and alcohol as a teenager. She was marginalized by her White relatives who referred to her as squaw, a derogatory term. The only way she could connect to her Native spiritual side was to spend time on the reservation with her cousins and teen peer group.



Frank Cloutier remembered the quality of life differences between the Isabella Reservation and the community of Mt. Pleasant a few miles away. The reservation lacked paved roads, basic utilities, and social services that were common in the neighboring White towns. Frank saw his first outhouse on the reservation and remembers that the main road had a tree growing in the middle of it. For him the separation of the haves and

have-nots was light years apart. Each story contains memories of poignant and painful episodes of growing up and learning how to survive in two worlds by denying and concealing their Native roots in the White society.

II. Betting on the Future

According to Dennis Kequom, Sr., a Saginaw Chippewa Chief, there is a false assumption that the majority of Indians are living well thanks to legalized gaming and tax-free sales of tobacco and alcohol. However, only 10% of casinos are profitable. The Chippewa [Soaring Eagle Casino and Resort](#) that opened in 1998 on the Isabella Reservation is one example. Recognizing that the future of gaming is limited in a saturated market, the tribe is using its resources to build alternate employment opportunities. The gaming profits are divided on a per capita basis, and a full range of social and cultural services are provided to Tribal members. The Saginaw Chippewa are betting on a brighter future.



III. Kill the Indian - Save the Child



to eradicate any remnant of their culture and language. Their cultural identities were “killed to save them from their savage roots” and prepare them for a new life in the White world. Approximately 60,000 children were removed from their parents and sent, voluntarily and involuntarily, to boarding schools in the East and Mid-West.

One of these forced acculturation

This chapter is the saddest and most depressing segment of the video. From the 1860s to the 1930s, the federal government waged a two-pronged war against Tribal Americans. When ethnic genocide and removal failed, Native children were taken from their families and sent to federal boarding schools where White teachers forbade and tried



schools was the Mt. Pleasant Indian Industrial Boarding School (1893-1934) in central Michigan. The regimented life in this boarding school included tattooing a registration number on each student’s arm, much like the Nazis did to concentration camp victims. The Indians resisted their new coerced identities. At the hands of strict White officials, the children were treated harshly. Many suffered physical and sexual abuse, forced labor, teen alcoholism, and early deaths, indicated by 174 unaccounted student graves.

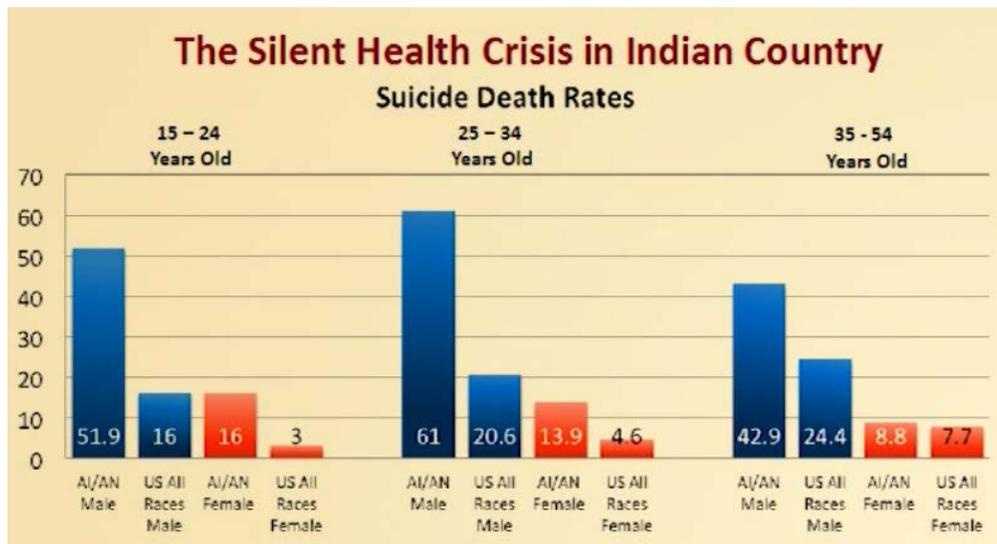
The most common memory shared by survivors and their families during the 75th anniversary of the Mt. Pleasant School’s closing was the feeling of “not knowing how to love.” This absence of parental love and family affiliation resulted in soulless children who, many anthropologists believe, fell victim to the high levels of physical/sexual abuse, neglect, drug addiction, and unemployment Native Americans experience on and off the reservations. The Saginaw Chippewa have embarked on a journey of forgiveness by preserving parts of the former Mt. Pleasant Boarding School as a memorial to their survival. As one member explained, “You can’t heal if you continue to blame others” for the terrible injustices and criminal acts inflicted on millions of Native Americans.



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IV. Walking the Red Road

The title of this chapter is a metaphor for individual recovery that so many Tribal members, especially males, must traverse. Native Americans have the highest per capita rates of suicide, unemployment, drug abuse, and a host of other social problems in the United States.



Drinking became a traditional self-inflicted medication to conceal the pain of being marginalized, living in communities steeped in rural poverty, and growing up in dysfunctional families torn apart by chronic unemployment, domestic violence, and substance abuse. Tribal social workers believe the definition of becoming a warrior must be reframed. There is much more to accomplish besides stopping drinking or maintaining sobriety; those who recover must achieve [wellbriety](#) and lead a productive life for themselves, their families, and the community.

V. Culture as Prevention

To regain a semblance of balance and a healthy relationship with the



predominant White culture, Native members believe they must study and teach their language and cultural traditions. Language protects culture, so they offer total immersion lessons in Objibwe or Anishinabe at the lower primary level in the [Ziibiwing Cultural Center](#), located on the Isabella Reservation in Mt. Pleasant, MI. The drum ceremony occurs each

time there is a festival. Members believe the drum contains the voice of the Great Spirit and the drum rhythm sounds like a human heartbeat.

VI. Calling on the Ancestors

Tribal members are surrounded by their pre-history but were taught to be ashamed of their origins and Native identity. Before the Whites subdued them and forced the survivors to live on reservations, the Native life was an organic whole of being one with nature. The name “Michigan” means “great trees from sea to sea” as the forests appeared before they were logged. Many Americans are familiar with one stereotyped perspective of Native life on the Great Lakes through the episodic poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882), *The Song of Hiawatha* (1855), an idealized and sentimental journey on the southern shores of Lake Superior.

VII. Lighting the Sacred Fire

The sacred fire is kept burning in a lodge year around. The fire is for ceremonial reasons and represents the center of the earth and life spirit of the people and tribe. The fire begins with special materials and is seasoned with spiritual items in the

medicine wheel and the four directions in life. Tobacco is the east, cedar is the south, sage is the west, and sweet grass is the north on the medicine wheel.

VIII. The Purifying Lodge

The sacred fire is used to heat the stones that are used in the purifying sweat lodge that connects a representation of an umbilical cord to the sacred fire. The intense heat causes everyone inside to sweat and thus draws out any shame. Seven teachings in the sweat lodge represent the highest values in Tribal life and human relationships. Some of teachings are respect, truth, humility, generosity and, most importantly, love.



IX. Telling Our Story

Levi Rickert, the editor of the [Native News](#), believes that the mainstream media only report events that portray Tribal members as fighting or in some way connected to the casino. Their daily lives and many accomplishments hold little interest to the outside world. The mainstream media ignores acts of prejudice and discrimination against Tribal members such as the 2012 suspension of a 12-year-old Native student in Wisconsin because she was teaching another girl how to say “hello” and “I love you” in the Menominee language.

X. Hollowing out Your Bones

Scott Badenoch, founder and CEO of a design company and a Princeton graduate, believes that the secret of invention does not come from individuals but from the voice of the Great Spirit through them. When faced with big problems in life, instead of attacking them, he recommends sitting back and allowing the Great Spirit to speak through their bones and resolve the conflict.

XI. Pow Wow for Mother Earth

Each July there is a great gathering or [Pow Wow of Michigan tribes](#). The dances and drum ceremony are collective and individual expressions of stories and emotions. Part of the Pow Wow is dedicated to honoring the Native veterans who served in the US military. Others use the dance to express the wishes of an elder who for many reasons cannot dance. This annual Pow Wow is a powerful statement and unifying experience. Hopefully this display of collective pride will lower the high rates of Native American teen suicide, pregnancy, violence, crime, substance abuse, and other social problems that are symptomatic of a people disconnected from their culture and marginalized in the mainstream culture.



XII. The Medicine Wheel

The video concludes with an explanation of the accomplishments of the Saginaw Chippewa tribe. The successful casino has enriched the tribe collectively and individually. The profits have been reinvested in the community to provide a wide array of health, educational, and social services. In 2004, the Tribe built the [Ziibiwing Center of Anishinabe Culture and Lifeways](#) to explain, preserve, and teach the history and living culture of the Saginaw Chippewa.

This tribe fortunately survived cultural and physical genocide and is moving forward to improve the lives of its members. To heal and progress, the tribe must let go of the resentment it holds against those who did terrible things to them in the name of promoting Western values and American civilization. The Tribal leaders want their members to do more than learn about themselves. To survive and prosper in a global society, they must learn about all cultures. Thus, their fires still burn.

The video earns a 9 on a scale of 10 for meeting or exceeding multicultural educational standards in terms of expressing social conditions in a historical context; engaging personal dialogue; promoting self-reflection and transformational aspiration; and increasing viewer comfort through vivid cinematography, comfortable pacing, clear sound, original music, and effective editing.

Resources

The following supplemental websites may help educators use *Our Fires Still Burn - The Native American Experience* (2013) in a multicultural learning environment:

One can purchase a copy of the video from their website:

<http://www.ourfiresstillburn.com/>

A History of the Federal Government's Boarding Schools for Tribal Americans:

<http://www.sagchip.org/ziibiwing/planyourvisit/pdf/aibscurrguide.pdf>

North American Indian Timeline (1492-1999):

<http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/imperialism/notes/nativeamericanchron.html>

Native American History – Index of Free Digital Materials:

http://www.digitalbookindex.org/_search/search010hstn-at.asp

Acknowledgment

We extend appreciation to Ms. Audrey Geyer, Producer/Director of *Our Fires Still Burn - The Native American Experience*, for providing materials and photos used in the review.