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A desert nursery. Pima mother and her child.

America's Unknown People

By Father Ted Zuern, S.J.

208

They have been studied, measured, photographed, sketched, counted and analyzed by psychologists, anthropologists, sociologists and curiosity seekers. Yet, in spite of all this, as far as most Americans are concerned, they are the least known, least understood people in America.

IN THE VERY EARLY days of their discovery the Indians were looked upon as "children." "Children of nature" they were called. And some referred to them as "innocents of the forest."

Without their help, it is doubtful that Lewis and Clark would have been able to complete their long and arduous journey to the Pacific. But the Indians gave them horses, showed them the best ways to get through the difficult mountain passes, and directed them to the great rivers that flow to the ocean.

Many of the early trappers and traders found the Indian way of life so much to their liking that they became "Indians" and never went back to "civilization."

Then came a "different kind" of white man. He came not to explore, or trade, but to *take*. To take the Indians' land and settle on it. And it was only natural that he would want the best land, where the grasses grew tall and the water was sweet and plentiful.

These were the Indians' great hunting grounds, their "natural ranches" which sustained the buffalo, and made it possible to continue their way of life.

At first a few farmers here and there meant little or nothing to them. The old chiefs said, "there is enough land for all."

But they had no idea the world contained so many white men! They came by the hundreds, then by the thousands. With each passing year the great hunting grounds dwindled, and the wild game became increasingly scarce, and

life for the Indians grew more difficult.

Vast herds of buffalo disappeared. The elk, and then the deer became harder to find. Indian hunting parties had to range farther and farther to keep their people from starving. Hunger became a common thing, and during the winters, many starved.

Clearly, there *wasn't* enough land "for all." So, the Indians commenced to reclaim their ancient lands, by driving the settlers out.

They fought back. So then the European invaders had to find new words to describe them. They began to call them "barbarians," "savages," "bloodthirsty devils."

Unfortunately, motion pictures, television programs, school books and even history books—prepared by people who should know better—have continued to grind out these distorted views of the Indians.

The truth is, they were neither "children" or "barbarians."

They were *people* with distinctive life-styles, or cultures, which they adapted to the conditions of nature, whether they lived on the plains, in the forests or in the deserts.

They were mature human-beings, with many of the failings and many of the virtues of all human-beings.

They did not have iron, or bronze or guns. But sometime in the course of their many thousands of years on this continent, they developed what well may have been *man's first system of truly democratic government*.

They may not have had wheels, or cannons, or swords, but they were the possessors of a remarkable sense of the *true and important values in life*.

Amerigo Vespucci, who came here five years after Columbus, was the first to describe the outward expression of their philosophy of values.

"The wealth which we affect in Europe," he wrote, "such as gold, jewels, pearls and other riches, *they hold of no*



The intricate and colorful designs of Navaho Indians places them among the best blanket weavers in the world.



Hopi Indians in their underground chamber, called a kiva, perform various religious ceremonies in which rain, good crops are sought from their various gods. A religious people, the Hopi Indian tended to deify nature's powers.

value at all . . . and they are so liberal in giving that it is the exception when they deny you anything."

All through the centuries the Indians have clung to these time-honored concepts: a man's relations to his brother are more important than riches; giving and helping are of greater worth than anything any man can hoard; every man has his own rights, and every man should respect another's dignity and freedom; no man should criticize another, for we do not know, and no man is perfect; the land and the waters that flow on it are not for us alone, but for every living thing; the land is ours only to use, never to sell or trade, for it will be here long after we are gone.

These are characteristics that are imbedded in all the American Indian tribes. And no matter how much we may say we admire such traits and ideas, we must admit that it is the Indians who have lived them.

It has been a tragedy that these things were seldom understood by the people who dealt with them. The whole history of Indian affairs might have been a happier story.

But over and above all this there was one important facet of Indian life that even today is little understood or recognized by others. This is the Indians' deep and pervading sense of spirituality . . . their powerful feelings of the mystery of life . . . and the relationship of man to all of nature.

Early day missionaries found it impossible to believe that men who could neither read or write could possibly have religious beliefs worth considering. Yet we know that the Sioux, for example, had the very great concept of ONE God. "The Great Spirit," or "The Great Mystery" as they called Him, and they prayed to him as "Grandfather," much as we say, "Our Father."

Every part of their *daily life* was filled with religious significance. No feast, no celebration, no undertaking was commenced without prayer.

I cannot help but believe that their generosity, their respect for others, their concepts of democratic government, their regard for the freedom and rights of the individual, and their respect for all that nature consists of, sprung from their abiding sense of a power greater than man.

Yet through all of the centuries of the white man's encroachments on this continent, this vital and significant feature of Indian life has been ignored, denied or conveniently overlooked.

At the turn of this twentieth century, the director of the Federal Bureau of Indian Affairs demonstrated his ignorance of the true nature of the Indian people. He issued orders banning and

prohibiting the practice of all Indian religious rites and ceremonies.

It seems impossible to imagine, but in 1879—*fourteen years after slavery had been abolished*—it took a Federal Court case to acknowledge and declare that Indians are "*human-beings*."

But still today they are as strangers in their own country. They have been looked upon, shoved aside, isolated and forgotten. No other people in America have suffered so long or so much.

When they were herded onto the reservations their whole world was shattered, and they were made to become "welfare cases" against their will. Their human dignity and self-respect was battered and beaten from every side.

But what is truly good dies hard, if it ever dies at all. And Indian will and Indian faith is strong. So over the years, here and there, old men of their tribes have kept alive the ancient beliefs and wisdom of their people.

And now a most notable thing has been happening. For a number of years scholars, educators, writers, missionaries, philosophers and many others have been exhaustively searching out and studying these long-lived Indian beliefs and teachings. *And they have discovered there is much we can learn from the Indians!*

What an amazing turn-about! Suddenly the world is beginning to realize that far from being inferior, *these American Indians are a remarkable and unique people*. Once you get to know them you soon discover they possess fine minds, great perceptiveness and a deep love for beauty and things of the spirit.

The Greatest Gift for America's Indian Children



The above article is a compilation of various articles that appeared in RED CLOUD COUNTRY, a publication for promoting the support of the Oglala Sioux Indians and Red Cloud Indian school. It is extremely important that Indian children grow up with the knowledge that they have much to be proud of in their ancient Indian heritage and that they are every bit as talented as any other children in America. With self-confidence comes achievement and a greater development of their native talents. The grave injustices of the past can never be fully rectified but the present education of Indian children can prepare them for a brighter future. This is what the author, Fr. Ted Zuern, is helping to do at Red Cloud Indian school, Pine Ridge, South Dakota 57770.