



A MUSEUM THAT ADDRESSES THE STORY OF GENOCIDE

By Desiree Pham



Mescalero Apache boy

HOUSTON - It is a story that no one wants to hear, the story of the genocide of American Indians. But Steve Melendez, Pyramid Lake Paiute and president of the American Indian Genocide Museum, said it is a story that needs to be told because history is repeating itself, from the Lakota to the Western Shoshone.

As Melendez reflects on the newspaper articles and books that contain the facts of genocide, he says, "The facts are there; if we take time to look for them. The American

people have mentally censored the word 'genocide,' by accentuating the positive."

Melendez said in this age of disillusionment with politics and politicians, everything falls into the category of mere "opinion." "Even when a person brings up evidence of genocide it is something that people do not want to believe. When someone talks of genocide, it is as if it is only the person's opinion.

"Everyone wants to think the best of their ancestors, that they didn't murder anyone, that they didn't defraud anyone out of their homeland. We almost have to force this history into the minds of people."

The history of the genocide of American Indians has been silenced over the past 500 years. "Our long term goal is to change

Historic photographs:
The Bosque Redondo Indian Reservation
At Fort Sumner, New Mexico
1863-1868

Courtesy of New Mexico State Monuments



Navajo captives

the history books," said Melendez. The American Indian Genocide Museum is based in Houston.

The word "genocide" is censored even in the American Indian media. "If a writer for Indian Country Today interviews us and we mention 'genocide,' the editors will just censor it. It has happened over and over again," Melendez said. "That never happened before the paper was sold to the Oneida of New York," he added.

The history of genocide is also the history of the seizure of land and oppression. Melendez points to the Homestake Gold Mine in South Dakota. When the gold rush began in the Black Hills, so began the era of taking Indian peoples' land by killing the buffalo and starving the people off the land.

It was George Armstrong Custer who confirmed the discovery of gold in the Black Hills, followed by the U.S. failing to honor the Laramie Treaty of 1868. Then, President Ulysses S. Grant and the Secretary of the Interior told Congress to starve the Indians off the land. Faced with the prospect of gold, Grant and the Interior recommended withholding supplies from the Lakota.

In Grant's 7th Annual Message to the Senate and House of Representatives on Dec. 7, 1875, he said, "...The Discovery of gold in the Black Hills, a portion of the Sioux Reservation, has had the effect to induce a large immigration of miners to that point. Thus far the effort to protect the treaty rights of the Indians to that section has been successful, but the next year will certainly witness a large increase of such immigration.

"The negotiations for the relinquishment of the gold fields having failed, it will be necessary for Congress to adopt some measures to relieve the embarrassment growing out of the causes named. The Secretary of the Interior suggests that the supplies now appropriated for the sustenance of that people, being no longer obligatory under the treaty of 1868, but simply a gratuity, may be issued or withheld at his discretion," Grant said.



Interior view of the American Indian Genocide Museum in Houston, Texas. Photo courtesy of the AIGM

Documents also reveal the Secretary of Interior's decisions in the 1870s, when the Interior told Congress that Indians should be coerced into accepting the white man's ways and that the buffalo should be eradicated, along with the way of life represented by the buffalo.

Melendez points out that President Andrew Jackson's signing of the Indian Removal Act, removing Indians from east of the Mississippi, was another act of ethnic cleansing. "History is now repeating itself," Melendez said.

The gold-rich ancestral land of the Western Shoshone in Nevada, also long sought by the United States for nuclear testing and the Yucca Mountain nuclear waste dump, is a modern day Black Hills saga. "Right now there is \$600 million held in trust that they (Sioux) have refused to accept," Melendez said referring to the Lakota and the Black Hills claim settlement.

Melendez said the U.S. Courts, Interior and Bush administration have worked in collusion to disenfranchise the Shoshone from their homeland. "It is happening over and over again. That is one of the motivations for our museum. When we see the injustices happening over and over again, we have to do something about it."

Melendez said when he returned from serving in Vietnam, the price offered by the U.S. for Northern Paiute land was \$1 an acre. "Every tribe has fallen to the 'Kangaroo Court' of the Indian Claims Commission."

The Indian Claims Commission, he said, since its creation has been a means for the United States to circumvent the due process of law. The court is a violation of international law, he said.

The United Nations Declaration of Human Rights states that people could not be deprived of their property without due process of law. Melendez said the reason for truth telling and the museum is to encourage a better world. "This is a labor of love, there is no hatred involved. We believe in peaceful coexistence. We believe the only way to do that is to have the truth and act on the truth."

Recalling his words to the students at the Jewish Holocaust Museum, he said, "You are the generation we have been looking for. Finally, there is a generation that will not sit silently and take things for granted."

The American Indian Genocide Museum's latest project is the Star Quilt Project. Since the star quilt is given in recognition or as an honor, the American Indian Genocide Museum and Students and Teachers Against Racism are calling on Indian tribes to become involved with the creation of the quilt and more education about genocide.

The museum is encouraging tribes to promote this quilt in their local area with the hope of bringing local and national history into the curriculum of the schools.

"The past is never easy to deal with, however, it will never change until we face it head on. We can never bring back those of our people who died. Yet, we need to keep that injustice and their deaths alive in memory because when we forget, they too are forgotten." "The hurt goes so deep that it is easier to keep it buried, but the world must know. The Jews, Armenians and Greeks make sure that their genocide is not forgotten."

With the quilt project, stories can be told as the tribe decides and can also be displayed in poetry, prayers, art, and of course, a patch for the quilt. "This quilt is to be a quilt of 'Hope, Healing and History.'"

The American Indian Genocide Museum, raising funds for a permanent facility, is located at 3004 Bagby near downtown Houston. Currently, the museum is seeking a vehicle to serve as a mobile teaching unit for the American Indian Genocide Museum.

Email AIGM at : indmuseum@yahoo.com



The star quilt is often given in recognition or as an honor. The American Indian Genocide Museum and Students and Teachers Against Racism are calling for the honoring of all of the millions of American Indians whose lives have been changed by colonization and the many who have died in countless massacres, wars and removals over the last 500 years. We are requesting the participation of all tribes in the construction of this quilt which we hope will accomplish so many goals:

- We wish to bring recognition of the true history of American Indians on both a local and national level.
- We wish to bring national attention to the genocide of the last 500 years which has been ignored in education.
- We encourage all tribes to promote this quilt within their own local areas with the hopes of bringing local history into the curriculum of the schools as well as all schools nationally.
- We pray that this quilt will encourage non-Indian communities to accept their part in history and to acknowledge the past as a means of bringing healing to Indian children and communities today.
- We offer prayers that this quilt will bring harmony between cultures, especially in areas where discrimination is a continuing problem.
- We seek to encourage schools to bring tribal members into schools to not only teach their perspective of history, but to have tribal members introduce Native culture in the schools, and for schools to support the self-esteem and success of Native children.

The Quilt

Each tribe is requested to participate in the making of this quilt. Each tribe will create a patch that will detail any or all significant events that marked the loss of freedom that the tribe experienced due to colonization. If the tribe would like to detail multiple events, they may be permitted two patches, or one large one. There is no restriction on shape, however, size will be limited to 18 inch squared or in circumference for a single patch, or 18 inches by 36 inches for a double sized patch. The patch may be beaded, stitched or decorated in any way desired as long as it is permanent and will survive multiple generations. The tribe's name should be on the front of the patch.

The Book

Each tribe will also send the story of the tribe since the coming of the Europeans and what the patch represents. These stories will be used in a book, which will be issued in at least two volumes, and will be the first complete history of the American Indians from their own perspectives and will be a valuable asset to all schools and libraries. There is no specific limit on the amount of pages per story.

To learn more about The Star Quilt Project and how to participate contact:

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