

20 Years Later

The Origins of Indigenous Peoples Day

Excerpts of a Conversation between
Dennis Jennings and John Curl

Both Dennis Jennings and John Curl were original members of the Indigenous Peoples Day Committee in 1992. These are their thoughts about it twenty years later. Dennis Jennings was Head Man Dancer at the 20th anniversary powwow, and was also the coordinator of the first Indigenous Peoples Day in 1992. A member of the Sac and Fox Nation of Oklahoma, he returned to his homeland in the mid-1990s, where he has lived since. John Curl has worked on the project in Berkeley these 20 years. The 20th anniversary Berkeley Indigenous Peoples Day Powwow and Indian Market was celebrated on Saturday, October 13, at Martin Luther King Civic Center Park.



JC: Dennis, I'd like to ask you a few questions about Indigenous Peoples Day, your participation in making it happen back then, and what you think of it now 20 years later.

DJ: My memory of 1990-1991 and Indigenous Peoples' Day is all about the thirty to thirty five Indian organizations around the Bay Area. Out of thousands of Indians in the Bay Area, there were only a few dozen of us who had been thinking about this for a decade. My memory goes to Betty Cooper, chairperson of the Bay Area American Indian Alliance, a loose coalition of Indian organizations, mostly government-funded agencies concerned with the social welfare of Native peoples. Betty Cooper was progressive and far thinking, an Alcatraz veteran from the 1960s. Betty recruited and stood firmly behind Millie Ketcheshawno.

JC: Millie was the coordinator of our second Indigenous People Day in Berkeley in 1993, when we held our first powwow. And of course, her daughter, Leslie Deer, is our Head Lady Dancer this year, and her son, Gino, is now our powwow coordinator.

DJ: Millie was an organizer of first order. She herself talked about how she had come out of Oklahoma on the government sponsored relocation

program, how she arrived on the train with no support services. All those Native Peoples who had been removed and depopulated from their own homelands in the 1950s had arrived in various big cities with no support services, no community organizations. Betty and Millie and my own Wahpepah relatives had fought tooth and nail for services away from the land, for help with training and jobs and employment and health and school books and clothes. Now it was that thirty plus Native American organizations could have an alliance after decades of organizing and fighting for their rights. Betty said at least once in those days that Dennis was my left hand and Fred Short was my right hand. To me it was Betty Cooper who sent us to Berkeley.

JC: I didn't really know Betty. I heard that the Bay Area Indian Alliance was holding a conference at DQ University near Davis, and when they moved the conference to Laney College on its last day and opened it to non-Native people, I and a lot of other nonIndians joined in. I brought Mark and Nancy Gorrell to that conference, whom I knew from local politics, BCA. I believe that was also the first time I met you, as well as Lee Sprague and many other people. And out of that we organized the Berkeley chapter of Resistance 500. Our group became an official City task force with the mission of reporting on what the City should do for the Quincentennial.

DJ: In the rest of the Bay Area there was a lot of confusion and chaos about how to proceed, but there appeared in Berkeley an organized group of people who genuinely wanted to accept some ideas of what could be done with the old worn out concept of Columbus Day. To my knowledge, this was an outgrowth of the Berkeley Citizens' Action. They had even sent a representative to Quito, Ecuador to the meeting of all meetings on the whole continent to discuss this question. Personally I did not go to Ecuador, but I had helped raise money and make decisions on who should go and how to make decisions on who should go. It was in Quito that a multinational decision was made to change Cristobal Colon Day into Indigenous Peoples Day. In Berkeley we met non-Indians who did not have to be taught this concept. We met and appreciated political people who were experienced, brainy, down to earth, and organized.

JC: Actually, I was the representative who went to Quito. Here's how it happened. In 1990 was receiving a little newsletter from the South American Indian Information Center, which was run out of Oakland by Nilo Cayuqueo, a Mapuche man from Chile. In the newsletter was a small notice about the upcoming conference in Ecuador. I went down to the Oakland office and explained to Nilo that I was interested in getting involved with counter-quincentennial activities locally. Together he and I came up with the idea that I would go to the Berkeley mayor, Loni Hancock, whom I knew from working on her election campaigns, and ask her to send me to the conference as her representative, to gather information about how Berkeley should commemorate the quincentennial. I would pay for everything myself. And that is what happened. When I got back, we had a meeting of Loni, Nilo, and Tony Gonzales of the International Indian Treaty Council, whom I had met in Quito. Tony brought Millie Ketcheshawno to the meeting. That was the first time I met Millie.

DJ: After much planning and after the decision of the City Council, we were prepared to work! What really helped is that Millie and the Mayor Loni Hancock seemed to me not just on the same page but like good friends. Because of Millie and Betty and the Berkeley Committee, I got to work in City Hall, an office overlooking the park for several weeks. My memories of those fast moving days and weeks in 1991 and 1992 are now a haze with brilliant flashes of highpoints jumping out. I know that much argument and debate preceded our primary slogan, our preeminent concept, "Tell the children the truth!"

JC: Right, we studied the true history for a long time, debated it, then went back to the city council again and presented research showing how Columbus sent shiploads of enslaved Indians back to Spain, and invented the transatlantic slave trade. Under Columbus's leadership, over a hundred thousand Taino Indians on the island of Hispanola were killed and the survivors were enslaved in mines and plantations. So the task force proposed to the City Council to replace Columbus Day with Indigenous Peoples Day. And in October, 1991, that is what they did, unanimously.

DJ: We knew we did not just want one day to do this so we planned for the whole year. We worked on exhibits for all the public and private

galleries of art for the visual public aspect of anticipation. We had school programs in various local schools to promote reading about the true history of this land. Some of us were contracted to work on exhibits in the Livermore Museum, which were then copied and shipped to six other major educational museums elsewhere, including the Smithsonian. A group of us with the help of a Berkeley resident and professional theater artists, produced a play from oral histories available to us from UC about a fishing struggle case that twenty years earlier had gone to the US Supreme court. Many other efforts occurred far and wide. I promoted a public speaking activity called “Soapbox-Chautauqua,” which I recorded and edited and put on KPFA. I am very thankful that I got to work in and for the City of Berkeley and for my brand of people.

JC: And now it’s twenty years later. Of course, besides the 20th anniversary of Indigenous Peoples Day, this is also the 520th anniversary of Indigenous resistance and survival in the face of European colonialism.

DJ: I am exceptionally proud that twenty years later somebody remembered me well enough to ask me to come back and be a Head Dancer in an activity that I had but a small part in starting.

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