



Sunset over Oceti Sakowin.

Protest at Standing Rock: A personal recollection

Article and Photographs
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“When you’re done taking pictures and asking questions,” Nantinki “Tink” Young, head camp chef for the Standing Rock #NoDAPL protests, said to me, “maybe you can use those hands to put together that PVC pipe into a tent frame. People need a place to eat!”

I had come to this contested North Dakota corner of the Standing Rock Sioux reservation, a 90-minute drive south of Bismarck, in September 2016 to experience firsthand the grassroots movement that was galvanizing Indian Country and represented the largest gathering of tribal nations since Lakotas, Cheyennes and Arapahos administered rough justice to George Custer and his 7th Cavalry in June 1876.

The background circumstances were these:

Early in 2016, Dallas-based Energy Transfer Partners won approval to construct the Dakota Access Pipeline from the lucrative Bakken oil fields in western North Dakota to a terminal in southern Illinois. When an initial route under the Missouri River near Bismarck was rejected, owing to concerns over possible risks to the state capital’s municipal water source, the Army Corps of Engineers selected an alternative that would instead pass beneath the river only half a mile from the Standing Rock reservation.

The Standing Rock Lakota regarded the pipeline as an existential threat and considered DAPL a violation of the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1851, which established the boundaries of Lakota territory. (That treaty, broken by the United States government almost before the ink was dry on the parchment but never nullified, was later replaced by another

treaty in 1868, which did nothing to halt continued encroachment.)

While lawsuits against the Corps of Engineers worked their way through the courts, tribal historic preservation officer LaDonna Brave Bull Allard established the Sacred Stone Camp as “a center for cultural preservation and spiritual resistance.” Increasing numbers of indigenous supporters from across America and abroad mandated the creation of a larger camp on private, off-reservation land across the Cannonball River, a Missouri tributary.

The Oceti Sakowin camp, which took its name from the Lakota word for Great Sioux Nation, or Seven Fires Council, soon became the focal point for pipeline resistance. By the time of my arrival in late September, some 3,000 to 4,000 self-proclaimed “water protectors” representing more than 300 American Indian tribes had congregated there, arrayed in tight lodge configurations and hunkered down for an indefinite stay.

Through my WWA colleague and friend Joseph M. Marshall III, a Rosebud Lakota, I had obtained permission to stay at the Sicangu (Rosebud) camp opposite Oceti Sakowin. A two-day drive from Santa Fe, New Mexico, across stretches of the Great Plains so vast it felt as if my Subaru Outback were fixed on a treadmill while an endless cyclorama spun past, brought me to the banks of the Cannonball. I found enough level ground remaining to pitch a tent. When Joe arrived the next day, he promptly named the site “Camp *Wasichu*” – Camp White Man.

Flags of solidarity fly above Oceti Sakowin.



Distress flag waves over the veterans’ encampment.



The week before my arrival, violence had broken out when bulldozers cut a two-mile, 150-foot trench through an area said to contain ancestral graves and burial artifacts. Unarmed protesters who crossed a perimeter fence were met by private security guards with pepper spray and guard dogs. Video of the incident, captured by *Democracy Now!* journalist Amy Goodman, went viral.

Despite the ratcheting-up of tensions, a sense of quiet calm pervaded both the Rosebud and Oceti Sakowin camps. At that time, six months into the still-peaceful protests, a sense of hope prevailed; water protectors believed the ever-increasing public pressure and visibility of their movement, symbolized by the everywhere-visible slogan *Mni wiconi* – “Water Is Life” – would lead ETP to reconsider or, at best, ensure a stalemate.

“There hasn’t been anything like this, not in my lifetime,” Joe told me, visibly moved by the intertribal solidarity. We stood sharing tea alongside his “Indian pony” (a vintage Jeep) watching the early-morning mist rise off the river’s glasslike surface. Horses nickered in the high grass along the riverbank; the faint echo of drumming could be heard from Oceti Sakowin.

Joe recalled his days as a Marine in Vietnam, part of a 38-man platoon who “knew they were ready for anything. I get the same feeling here,” he said. Hundreds of flags, blown stiff in the cold, driving late September wind, lined the main approach to Oceti Sakowin, a testament to the movement’s widespread support. Hawaiian Islanders and

New Zealand Maoris sent delegations; one flag bore the emblem of the faraway United Arab Emirates.

After six months, the camp had coalesced into a thriving, virtually self-sufficient community. A council circle at the center offered daily programs of speakers, music and dance. Tink Young’s kitchen, supplied with a 12-burner stove that saw duty in Hurricane Katrina, ran 24/7, dishing out delicious, balanced meals along with the requisite fry bread.

Unpaved roads, muddied by rain, then frozen rock-hard, delineated regular neighborhoods. Veterans had a privileged section; many flew the upside-down Stars and Stripes, symbolizing distress. A day care center and school held daily classes. Boys competed in a vigorous game of lacrosse on an improvised playing field; at night, girls danced in jingle dresses in the beams of pickup-truck headlights.

A rotating team of tribal and outside lawyers dispensed legal aid from inside a black tent perched on a rise overlooking the main camp, known as “Facebook Hill” for its satellite accessibility. (Rumor had it that local and federal authorities were compromising Wi-Fi access with jamming technology, while others spoke of plainclothes Morton County, North Dakota, law-enforcement stalking rallies with facial recognition software.)

Non-Native volunteers hailed from all across America, and as far away as South Korea. They spanned a wide range of occupations and interests. I spoke with an Orlando, Florida-based



Intertribal wedding ceremony, Sicangu (Rosebud) camp.

naturalist and photographer; a self-described Pennsylvania “cosmetologist and clothing designer” who crowd-funded her trip with the help of a group calling itself “Black Men for Bernie”; and a part-time musician from upstate New York who brought his teenage kids to “witness what life looks like off the internet.”

Regardless of race, everyone attested to the unifying spirit of Oceti Sakowin. “I have a bigger family here than I’ve ever known,” admitted Alan “Fiddlin’ Al” Chidester, a radio host from Moscow, Idaho, one of a small contingent manning the Sacred Ground Camp, near where the now-silent Caterpillars had ripped up burial grounds. “White men talk too much,” he observed. “You’ve got one mouth and two ears. Do the math and listen.”

“I grew up hating white people,” admitted Keenan (no last name given), Fiddlin’ Al’s partner on sentry duty, an Ashinishabe/Minneconjou teenager. “Here, I’ve learned better.” Familiarity and a sense of common purpose had bred comradeship. Keenan passed the time fielding his theory of *Star Wars* as “really an Indian story.” (“Dude, think about it. Luke Skywalker is raised by his aunties, and never knew his father....”) “Black ink on white paper is how we’re going to win,” a Lakota elder named Stella Young assured a small crowd of listeners in the council circle one afternoon. “All we’re asking is for the U.S. government to obey its own laws.”

Not everyone was as sanguine about the tribe’s chances in court. A private enclave within Oceti Sakowin housed the “Red Warriors,” who staged nightly rock concerts and advocated a more

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March to reclaim desecrated ground.



STANDING ROCK (from page 17)

confrontational approach to pipeline resistance.

It was impossible not to feel the surge of energy manifesting itself throughout this unprecedented Gathering of Nations. Every day brought a new ritual of renewal. While a guest at Rosebud, I had the privilege to attend the camp's first intertribal wedding, conducted at sunset in an open-air Native American Church ceremony; observe a powerful horseback procession to re-consecrate violated sacred ground; and participate in a ritual sweat celebrating the repatriation of a historic pipe from an eastern mission school to its Lakota home.

Arvol Looking Horse, the 19th Generation Keeper of the Buffalo Calf Pipe, led the ceremony. Men and women crawled into the earthen lodge on hands and knees and sat shoulder to shoulder. Darkness was near absolute. Glowing red-hot stones called "grandfathers" – 28 of them – were laid into a pit. The lodge door flapped closed. Water hissed, coming to an instant boil as it was poured over the stones. An intense heat suffused the lodge. The drumming began.

Three rounds of chanting and song followed. Women's voices sounded ethereal over the drumming. The heat became almost unbearable. "Go to ground," a fellow participant whispered. "Mother Earth will protect you." With my ear pressed to the dirt, feeling the welcome breath of cool, the rhythm of the drums seemed to emerge from the earth itself. Then the sharp crack of a rattle reverberated overhead.

Later I was told the rattle marked the moment the spirits entered the lodge. No rattle had been carried by the singers, or by any of the participants. The origin of the sound was then and remains a mystery. Such moments left an indelible mark on all who participated.

"When the world answered the call to Standing Rock," said Paula Antoine, program coordinator for the Rosebud Sioux Tribe, "they answered a prayer and a call to be a good relative. Something we do every day, care for each other as you would your child."

In the end, the Oceti Sakowin camp was forcibly disbanded. The pipeline was built, and subsequent events have more than justified the tribe's environmental fears. Yet Indian Country emerged from the experience more united than ever before, determined to uphold and protect its sovereignty with new determination.

That is the true blessing of Standing Rock.

(Postscript: On March 25, 2020, a federal judge ruled that the Army Corps of Engineers violated the National Environmental Policy Act by approving federal permits for the Dakota Access Pipeline. The court chastised the Corps of Engineers for allowing construction without considering the expert analysis put forward by the tribe. Said Standing Rock chairman Mike Faith: "We welcome this news of a significant legal win. It's humbling to see how actions we took four years ago to defend our ancestral homeland continue to inspire national conversations about how our choices ultimately affect this planet.")

Dressed for the fancy dance.

