

# States of the Union

## THE LAST OF THE PAUGUSSETTS

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS

*"We ask this, Chief, to keep sacred the memory of our people."*

—FROM A 1927 STATEMENT TO THE MAYOR OF CHICAGO CONCERNING THE TREATMENT OF INDIANS IN SCHOOL TEXTS.

SACRED MEMORIES have their drawbacks; they tend to be noisy, inaccurate and self-glorifying. But the alternative to sacred memories is ethnic amnesia, a fate worse than chauvinism. Certainly a people without memory is a people without a future. That is the message of Massada, Valley Forge and Wounded Knee; that is the leak in the Melting Pot.

Now the Indians are asking white America to give them back their history. We stole it when we stole the land. "The First Americans Had No Flags" is the title of an early chapter in an elementary history book published in 1963 and still much in use. Of course American Indians did have their tribal flags, but if you are writing a white history you must take care to expunge red symbols. The reason is implied in the title of the text: *This Is Our Land*.

Because school-book historians have to justify our possession of the land, they either denigrate or ignore the original owners. Here are some current examples, taken from *Textbooks and the American Indian*, a superb analysis by Rupert Costo and Jeanette Henry: "Except for the Indians already here and the Negroes brought here from Africa, practically all the colonists were of European origin" (*Our Nation from Its Creation*, Prentice-Hall); "The Spanish found the California Indians very much like the Pueblo Indians but slower to learn" (*Your People and Mine*, Ginn & Co.); "These early Americans left no architectural monuments like the Egyptian pyramids. . . . They did not use the plow and the wheel. They had no written language" (*The Life History of the United States*, Time Inc.); "They knew nothing of the white man's idea of private ownership of property. Hunting grounds were claimed in common by a tribe. . . ." (*Our Country's History*, Ginn & Co.).

Indian schoolchildren are regularly exposed to such nonhistories, which generally create the impres-

sion that Indians brought on their own miseries. If they lost their land, these volumes seem to be saying, they had only themselves to blame: They were "slow to learn"; they did not grasp ideas of "private ownership"; they had no history.

The upshot of all this has been ethnic amnesia—the enforced forgetting of one's tribal past. A few years ago at St. Francis Mission School in South Dakota, a Jesuit seminarian named Tom Dooley was astonished to find that most of his teenage students, all of them Sioux, knew nothing of the Wounded Knee massacre or Crazy Horse's exploits. He decided to teach a special course in Sioux history.

For months he and his students delved into books about the Sioux. They focused on Crazy Horse, last of the tribe's great warriors, and on his hopeless struggle to regain freedom for the Oglala Sioux. When the students learned that Crazy Horse had been murdered, many of them wept.

"It came as a terrible blow," Dooley recalls. "I walked to the back of the room. I didn't think they'd want me to see them cry-

ing." It is not to be doubted that among last month's demonstrators at Wounded Knee were some of Dooley's former students. To acquire a history, alas, is to acquire a taste for vengeance. Yet Dooley was right; murders and massacres are best remembered, not hidden away.

A few weeks ago my wife Diane and I met an Indian bereft of sacred memories. His name is Edward Sherman and he lives with his white wife on the smallest Indian reservation in North America, a seven-room house on a half-acre lot in Trumbull, Connecticut. The reservation is one of four in Connecticut administered by the state welfare department.

Mr. Sherman, who is 84 years old, claims to be the last of the Pequots, a tribe depicted by the 19th-century historian John W. De Forest as "the most numerous, the most warlike, the fiercest and the bravest of all the aboriginal clans of Connecticut." But as nearly as I can make out, he is not a Pequot but a Paugussett. The Paugussetts made up a smaller, weaker tribe that held forth for a time in a place called Golden Hill, now a part of Bridgeport.

In 1730 the Paugussetts of Golden Hill became wards of the Connecticut colony and Golden Hill became a reservation. "They enjoyed their reservation peaceably until about 1760," notes De Forest, "when they were ejected by some of the neighboring white proprietors who laid claim to all the land but six acres, and enforced their claims by pulling down the Indian wigwams."

For the next 80 years, it seems, the Paugussett remnants—by then they were down to less than a dozen—wandered from reservation to reservation, the periodic victims of white land-grabbers. Finally, in 1842, the state set aside 20 acres for them in Trumbull, and Edward Sherman's grandfather built a house there. That and the small lot on

which it stands are all that remain now of the 1842 legacy.

**“W**HAT happened to the rest of the tribe's land?" I asked Mr. Sherman.

"Gone," he said with a shrug. "People just took it." As an afterthought he added, "When you're an Indian you're not a bigshot."

We were sitting in Mr. Sherman's small cluttered parlor, looking through his scrapbook. It contained local newspaper clippings about "the last of the Pequots," and photographs of "Chief Sherman" wearing a fussy headdress of eagle feathers. "Where did you get the headdress?" Diane asked. "Did your grandfather give it to you?"

"No, somebody made it. Some fellow at the Chamber of Commerce gave it to me to wear when the town had an anniversary. I had to give it back."

I asked him if he considered himself a chief, and he laughed. "The Pequots ain't nobody anymore," he said. "There's only me, and I ain't nothing."

"Have you ever heard of a tribe called the Paugussetts?"

"I think maybe I have," he said. "It sounds familiar. Maybe they live in New York, I don't know."

Whether a Pequot or a Paugussett, Mr. Sherman is a man without a tribe. He remembers no Indian words; he possesses no Indian me-

mentos. His "Indianness" has been conferred upon him by the white community — by a Chamber of Commerce that loans him a headdress and calls him "Chief." For all practical purposes Mr. Sherman is part of the American melting pot; his government sends him and his wife a monthly Social Security check.

Can we blame the young Sioux for clinging to their ancestral history?

Diane asked Mr. Sherman another question: "Do you have any family?"

"I have a son from another marriage. He makes a lot of money in California, but he's not an Indian. The rest of the Pequots you can find down the road behind the firehouse. That's the town cemetery."

We asked Mr. Sherman to take us to the cemetery. "OK," he said, pointing to his cane. "Just hand me my horse." When he stood, he looked surprisingly large amid the bric-à-brac.

A light rain began to fall as we drove through the gate. "This is where my father and his father are buried," Mr. Sherman said. "My grandfather, he's the one who built the house. He was a sailor like me. I spent 27 years at sea but they didn't give me no pension. They just beached me. Park here."

We walked gingerly between the gravestones. "It's somewhere around here," he said. "It's got a big stone with 'Sherman' on it." He veered suddenly and limped off toward another section. "I think maybe it's over there."

Diane went looking in a new direction, and I just stood in the rain. Mr. Sherman was walking faster now, not bothering to circumvent the graves. Once in a while he would crouch low to read a stone, using his "horse" as a pointer. I watched as he hobbled over the coffins of the town notables—the Salisburys, the Nichols, the Bloods—searching for the graves of his fathers.

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