

Monacans Return To Natural Bridge First Annual Powwow

Before colonists arrived, Monacan Indians roamed the area from Tennessee to Maryland. For thousands of years they visited Bear Mountain, a sacred ancestral mountain, to pray. Now the Monacans are returning to one of their sacred sites, the Natural Bridge of Virginia, to reclaim their heritage; and they are raising funds through powwows to purchase back land on their ancestral Bear Mountain.

After barely surviving colonization and frontier expansion, Virginia Monacans of the 19th and 20th centuries suffered severe forms of discrimination entwined in Virginia slavery and racism.

According to Peter Houck and Mintcy Maxham in their recent book, *Indian Island in Amherst County*, as white traders, explorers, colonists, immigrants, and freed slaves settled, a series of events, English laws, and 19th and 20th century Virginia laws ultimately wrote the Monacans off the books in Virginia and put them on a “hit list.” Not permitted to exist as “Indians” under the Virginia Racial Integrity Law of

1924, Monacans had become Virginia’s forgotten people.

During the 1700s Indians lost territory throughout Virginia. Colonial English laws granted land only to whites. Indians were considered squatters when whites applied to the courts for property. The only way an Indian could become a landowner was by marrying a white. By the 1730s, many Monacans had given up attempts to remain in their Virginia territory. They made reluctant peace with the Iroquois and joined them in Pennsylvania. During the American Revolution the Iroquois 6 Nations, including Monacans, dispersed into Canada.

Lost In the White Lie

The remaining Virginia Monacans suffered hardship and discrimination which intensified dur-

ing pre-Civil War years. Andrew Jackson’s Removal Act in 1830 led them to conceal their identity or move to the Bear Mountain settlement in Amherst County. Will Johns purchased over 400 acres on Bear Mountain during the pre-Civil War period to establish a safe, self-supporting Indian settlement when prejudices were heightening. The Johns Colony became a 32-square-mile island of Indian-whites. Black and white racial tension intensified and Jefferson’s dream of proudly mixed blood turned into a nightmare for Monacan descendants. The Indians were quickly losing their identity on record as the government recorded them as “mulatto,” and refused to distinguish them from individuals with African descent. The settlement became a target as Indians and part-Indians were identified with slaves during a period of fear of slave rebellion.

By the 20th century the settlement families lost their land and claim to both their white and Indian heritage. In 1908, the Episcopal church established the Mission on Bear Mountain and built a mission church and school house for children up to age 16.

In 1924, William Plecker of the Bureau of Vital Statistics instituted the Virginia Racial Integrity Law. It classified all Indians in Virginia as colored or Negroes, and denied them marriages, access to government services, and schools. During Plecker’s 24-year-tenure as State Registrar, Amherst and Rockbridge counties’ Indians became a frequent target of his anti-Indian campaign. While Blacks were allowed to exist as a distinct people, Indians could not. Labeled as colored along with Blacks, an Indian descendent was indistinguishable from Black on the books. Many didn’t dare publicly acknowledge their descent. Plecker’s goal was to have no Indians listed in Virginia. By 1934 he had compiled a “hit list” of surnames distributed to local registrars, nurses, doctors, clerks of courts, and schools throughout all counties. Bear Mountain names were singled out. His Racial Integrity Law remained in effect for more than 40 years.

During the 1930s and 1940s many Bear Mountain area residents moved to other states

Monacan Indians were written off the books, but not off the face of the earth.

where they were not forced into acquiring inaccurate birth and death certificates. In 1951, Plecker wrote to the Richmond News Leader announcing that there were not any Indian descendants in Amherst. While Plecker had set out to write the Monacans off the books, VMI Colonel Robert Carroll started to unearth significant artifacts during the 1950s.

In the late 1950s, after the Warren Court ruling that separate races in public schools was illegal, high schools in other communities throughout the state accepted Indian children, but not so in Amherst. Still not allowed to attend public schools, education beyond the Mission school's seven grades was not available.

In 1963 Deaconess Florance Cowan from the Bear Mountain Mission School demanded admission to local public schools at all levels, where a year earlier Black children had been admitted. But Amherst County teachers were required to label a child from the Mission as Negro on the permanent record card even when the child appeared Caucasian or Indian.

Recognition

In 1989, the Monacans became the state's 8th Officially Recognized Tribe; Virginia records now acknowledge the group's past and present existence in the state. The Monacans maintain a Tribal Register and government, and the Tribe has been endorsed by the Virginia Council on Indians. They incorporated as the Monacan Indian Tribal Association, a non-profit organization.

In 1991, when George Whitewolf returned from out west to Amherst, he joined with Monacans who were stripped of much of their Indian culture. With his Indian heritage intact and the will to recover a lost culture, he has played a major role in helping his fellow Monacans reclaim their heritage and homeland.

Several years ago they completed a portable museum exhibit that documents the Tribe's history and educates the Virginia public. In 1993 there were over 700 members

of the Tribal Association with over 300 still in the Amherst area willing to acclaim their descent.

Natural Bridge Powwow

A legend attributes the Monacans with discovering the Natural Bridge, known as one of the Seven Natural Wonders of the World, prior to George Washington's surveying it and Jefferson's purchasing it.

When the Monacans were being pursued by the Powhatans and Shawnees, their lives were saved by the massive 215-foot tall rock bridge that appeared before them to carry them to safety across a huge ravine. They believed the bridge to be a sign from the Great Spirit and so it renewed their strength and courage to drive off their attackers.

With the Powwow at Natural Bridge, held April 29-30, the Monacans bridge to life and inspiration in the past became their bridge to the future. Once again they experienced renewed strength and courage. After they buy back their land, they will be one large step closer to their dream of developing a museum and cultural center on Bear Mountain.

Regardless of Plecker's attempt to eliminate Indians from Virginia in the 20th century, the Monacan culture will re-emerge as the 21st century approaches through the strength and courage of the Indian descendants, the work of archeologists and historians, government recognition, and the thousands of participants at the 1st Annual "Return of the Monacan Indian" to Natural Bridge Powwow.

Mary Ann Puglisi of Down To Earth Communications of Washington, DC, is Communications Director for the "Return of the Monacan Indians" to Natural Bridge Powwow.

For more Powwow information, contact Natural Bridge of Virginia, 800-533-1410 ext. 3, or George Whitewolf at 804-929-6911. To order a book about the Monacan Indians, *Indian Island in Amherst County* by Peter W. Houck and Mintcy Maxham, published by Warwick House Publishing, Lynchburg, Virginia, call 804-929-0334.

A group of Virginia Monacans at the foot of the Natural Bridge where they celebrated their return at the April Powwow. Photo by Mary Ann Puglisi.

