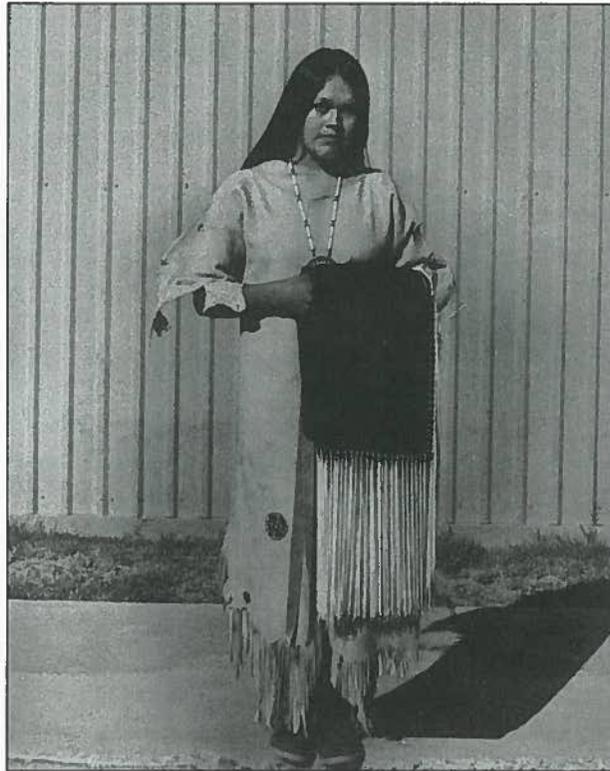


## A Call to Action

Sylvia Polacca

*As Told to Ian Wilson Record*



*A teenaged Sylvia Polacca in traditional Havasupai dress in 1975. (Photos and captions courtesy of Sylvia Polacca)*

*As Native peoples across the country celebrate the 30th anniversary of the Indian occupation of Alcatraz (1969-1971) this fall, many newspapers, magazines and networks are filing stories that attempt to assess both the event's immediate impact as well as its cultural legacy. While many of these stories center on the perspectives of occupation leaders like John Trudell—who appropriately deemed the Alcatraz occupation “a rekindling of the spirit” for Native peoples—few of these retrospectives delve into how the event transformed the lives of the many young people who took part in the occupation. The following first-person essay reflects the experiences of Sylvia Polacca (Hopi/Tewa/Havasupai), who as a young teen left her reservation to join the group that occupied the island of Alcatraz, the group that called itself “Indians of All Nations.” The photos in this special section of RED INK depict daily life on the island during the occupation as seen through the eyes of Polacca.*

I was about twelve or thirteen years old at the time. I was actually on my reservation in Parker, the Colorado River Indian Reservation in Parker (Arizona). We saw the news story on TV that these Indians had occupied Alcatraz. The occupiers were bringing public attention to issues faced by American Indians, as well as test an obscure federal policy which allows unused federal land to be reclaimed for Indian use.

Tribes are still using this policy today to reclaim Indian lands. After watching the news, our family sat down and began talking about it. It was really a powerful and moving story. My sister Mona and I discussed with my dad about how we would like to go over there and see if it was real, see for ourselves if it was possible that Indians could actually take over a piece of federal property and occupy it like that. Because it just seemed impossible. When you come from a real reservation childhood where everything is dominated by non-Indians and your whole life seems to be guided by whatever the Bureau of Indian Affairs says, or whatever IHS (Indian Health Service) says, or whatever the school says—very little self-determination was going on at that time—to see a story like this was just a real powerful call to action. That's the way I saw it, even at that age.

My mom and dad were always the kind of parents who encouraged you to do whatever it is that you wanted to do and take risks. We always knew we had that safety net, the family, to fall back on. When my sister and I decided that we wanted to go to Alcatraz, when we started talking about it and talking about it, and then we started planning—we had family in the Bay area and actually contacted relatives and said we were coming to the Bay area and that we wanted to go to Alcatraz—my parents realized that we were very serious. They didn't object and were very supportive. My dad sat us down one evening and told us that if we really wanted to do this they would go ahead and let us do it, but that we had to understand that if anything should happen over there—he was talking about the Coast Guard coming in and taking back the island and the possibility of us landing in jail, getting in trouble with law enforcement—that their arms didn't reach that long. There was no way they could possibly go to San Francisco and collect us, take us out of jail. They just didn't have that kind of money. We were very poor at the time.

They told us a bunch of other things as well, like how to behave, what to look out for, to stay together and keep an eye on each other and that kind of thing. Then my dad said that we could go ahead and go, but that we needed someone else, a guy, to

go with us. We talked my sister's boyfriend at the time, Mickey, into going with us. My oldest sister, Melinda, drove us up to San Francisco, where we stayed with her and her family for a while.

What would happen is they would call for people when there was concern that the Coast Guard was going to come onto the island and take it back. What they would do is call to the mainland to the Intertribal Friendship House, and word would then go out among the people who were there that more people were needed on the island. It was a kind of a rotating system. Some people would leave, but others were needed to take their place so that it wouldn't seem like there were just a handful of people there. So that is basically what we did—we went over so that it would seem like there was a constant flow of people on the boat to the island.

When they got the word at the Friendship House that they needed people to come and stay on the island so that a group of them could go off and do what they needed to do, we volunteered. We told our older sister that was what we were there to do. They took us down to Pier 40 (39, 40, 41 I think were the piers where the boat always loaded) where we caught the boat and went over. The boat was called the Clearwater. I think Creedence Clearwater Revival was connected with that in some way or another. When we were getting on the boat, Buffy Sainte Marie was getting off the boat and John Trudell was getting on the boat with his baby. We stayed on Alcatraz for about a week and then we left for a week and then we went back for a week. It was kind of like that—off and on. We were able to get to know all of those people over there.

I went to Alcatraz to really see for myself if it was actually happening. It was an empowering experience. You got out there to the island and the feeling of unity and camaraderie among the people that were there was just amazing. I think that had it not been occupied primarily by Indian people, the feeling might have been different. Everybody was looking out for one another, everybody pitching in—men as well as women—everybody using what skills they had to contribute to meeting the

needs of the little community that developed there.

Alcatraz felt safe. Kids were running and playing and digging in the sand, doing what kids do. The heavy stuff was left up to the adults. There was always somebody watching out for the Coast Guard, there was always somebody watching the cell blocks to make sure that nobody got hurt. The adults took responsibility for the safety and care of everyone on the island.

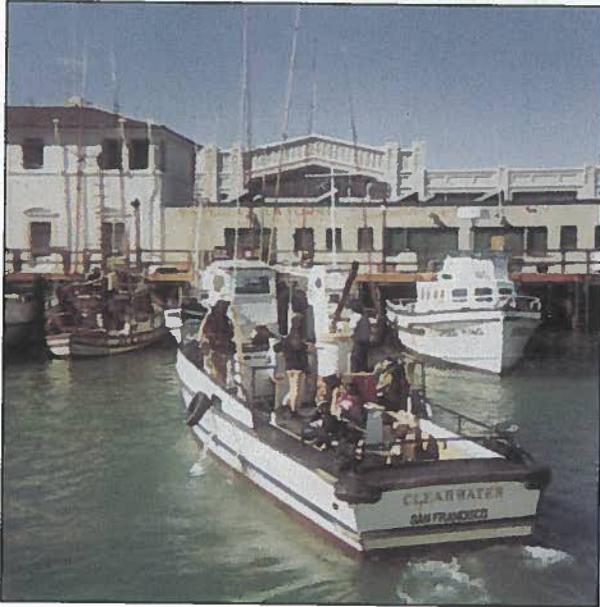
When I first got there, I thought we would come across people standing guard with guns. It wasn't like that at all. Kids were wandering around and playing in the playground, people were taking care of the sweat, and then there was the groups of strategists who would get together and plan the next steps. Guys were fishing and preparing the fish for the meals, people were setting up schedules for who was going to cook today and who was going to clean today. When you have a community like that there has to be some kind of order established. It was just a process of people coming in and volunteering to do what needed to be done.

In retrospect that is they way I see it, but when I was there it was just about taking in what was going on and enjoying it, and meeting all of these different people. One of the things that our parents told us was that whenever you go to visit people of a different culture and in a different place, that you always do things their way. That's what they said. You eat the things they eat, you dress the way they dress, you dance the way they dance. In other words, you fit into their culture, you don't force them to conform to yours. That's the way we looked at things when we were there. We were eating fish and stuff that we never ate before, making friends with all of these different people from different tribes, getting to know other kids that were our age as well as the older people. Most of the people that we befriended were adults. It was a real powerful learning experience for me.

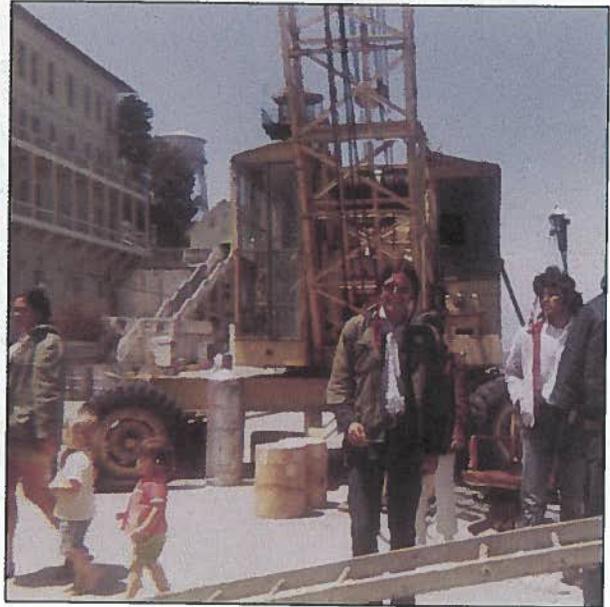
When it came time for us to leave, it was one of those kinds of situations where you hated for it to end because the feeling was so good. It's not that

you were having such a great time, it's just that you hated to let the feeling go. The only other thing that I can liken that to is the experience that I had on the Long Walk to Washington, D.C., sometime after Alcatraz. At Alcatraz and on the Long Walk, there was no need to be afraid because everyone was out there for the same thing. We all had the same vision, we all had the same mission, we all had the same purpose in mind, so there was no need to be afraid. I think those experiences have paved the way for the rest of my life. I have always been able to do things like that, go to different places not knowing what to expect, but just going there and taking the best out of whatever the situation is, being able to get along with people of different tribes, whether it is California urban Indians, or Florida Seminoles, or the Mohawks of New York.

There are a lot of things in life that can't be explained in words, they can only be experienced. Words just don't seem to do justice to the experience. That is the way Alcatraz was. That's the way certain kinds of ceremonies are. When you go to a stomp dance or a sunrise ceremony, those kinds of things can only be experienced. Maybe it is the spiritual aspect that I am talking about. I think Alcatraz had a definite impact, that can't be denied. But what that impact was can only be determined at an individual level. I have had people who are my age and older who have come up to me and said, "You know what, when Alcatraz happened, I wanted to go so bad." It was a call to action. It was time. In the 1960s and 1970s, self-determination was just beginning to grow. It was not a national movement yet. It was just beginning to blossom. For a lot of us, especially those of us who lived on reservations, there was always concern about saying too much, about offending big brother. Alcatraz flew in the face of everything. It showed that we could stand up for ourselves, that we could take that kind of action and not be shot dead or thrown in prison. It touched something in a lot of Indian people, whether they went or not, whether they expressed their support for it or not. It was an eye-opener. It was a great experience. I wouldn't change it for anything in the world.



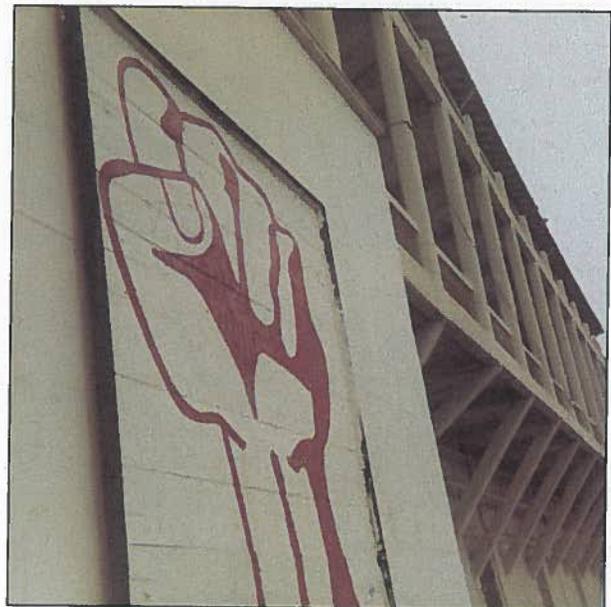
*The journey begins: pulling away from Pier 40 in the boat known as the "Clearwater." (1970)*



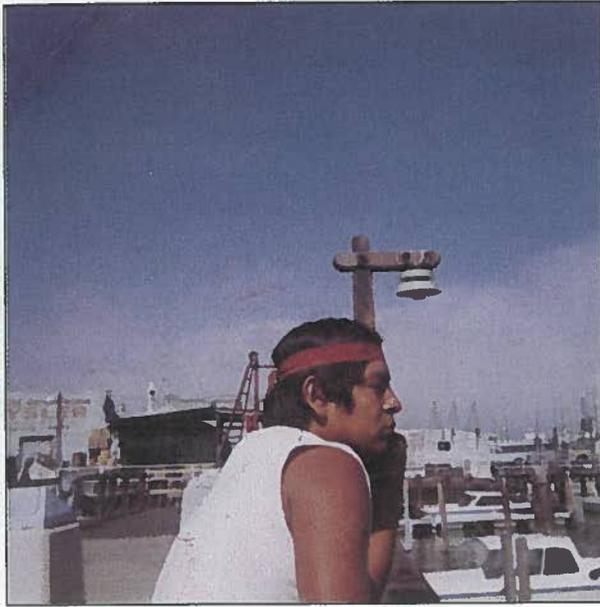
*Maudy Momaday, relative of renowned author N. Scott Momaday, arriving at Alcatraz. (1970)*



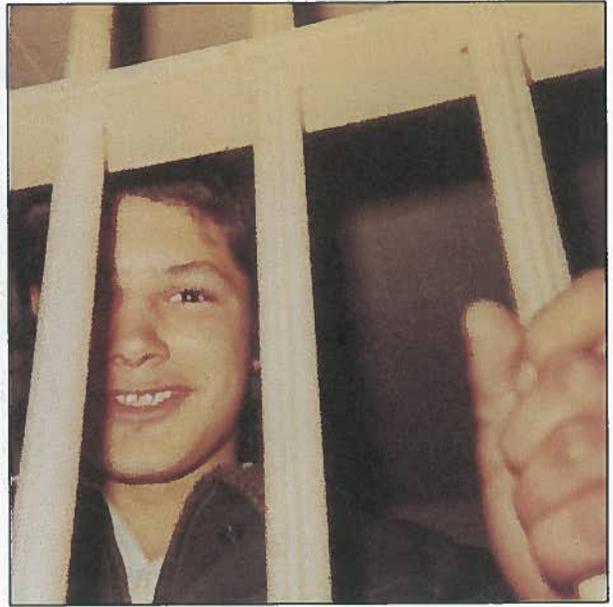
*John Trudell, spokesman for the occupiers of Alcatraz, boarding Clearwater at Pier 40. (1970)*



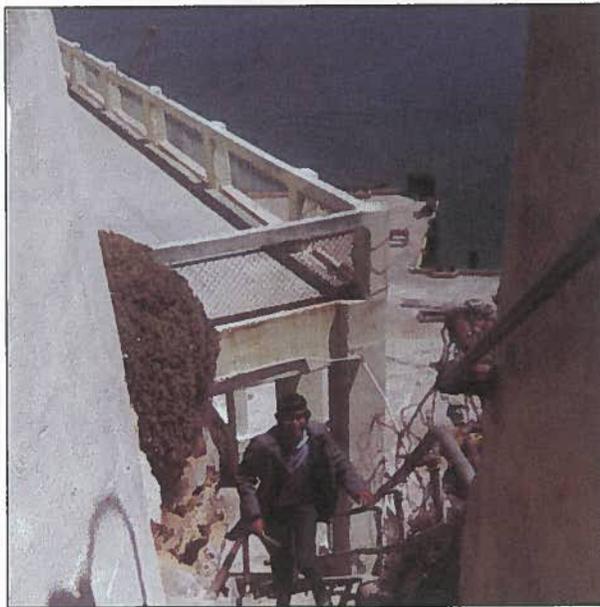
*The Fist on Alcatraz building, painted by Lollie and Gino. (August 1970)*



*Johnny Mahkewa, my cousin,  
on Pier 40, looking pensive.  
(August 1970)*



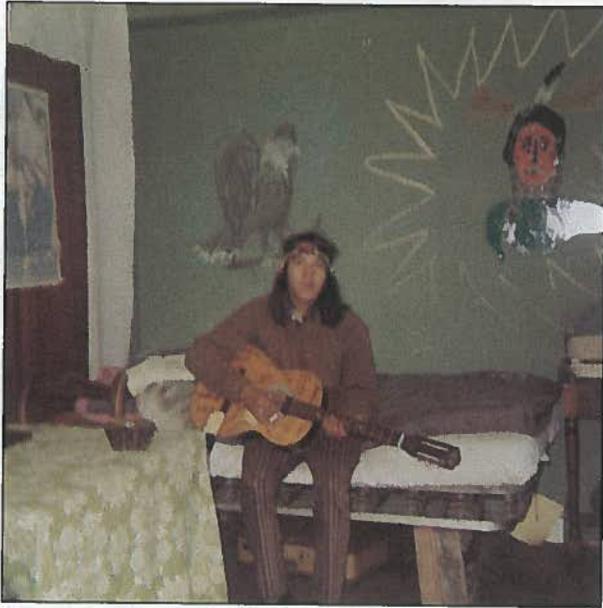
*Gary Oakes, brother of occupation  
leader Richard Oakes, in cell block  
on Alcatraz. (August 1970)*



*Micky Welsh, our traveling  
buddy, running up the stairs  
at Alcatraz. (July 17, 1970)*



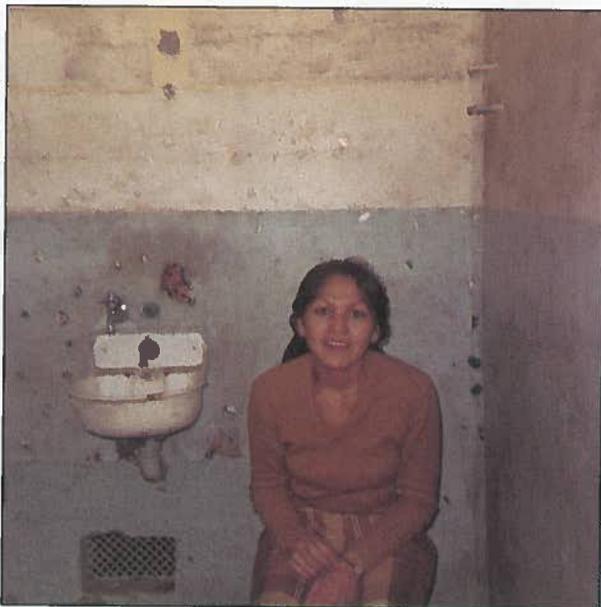
*Howard, an Alaskan Native,  
on Pier 40 in  
San Francisco. (1970)*



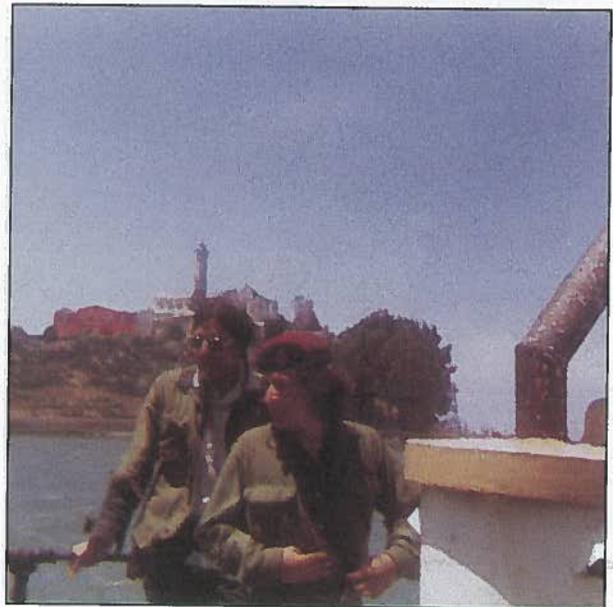
*Walter "Musty" Williams  
in the living quarters  
at Alcatraz. (November 1970)*



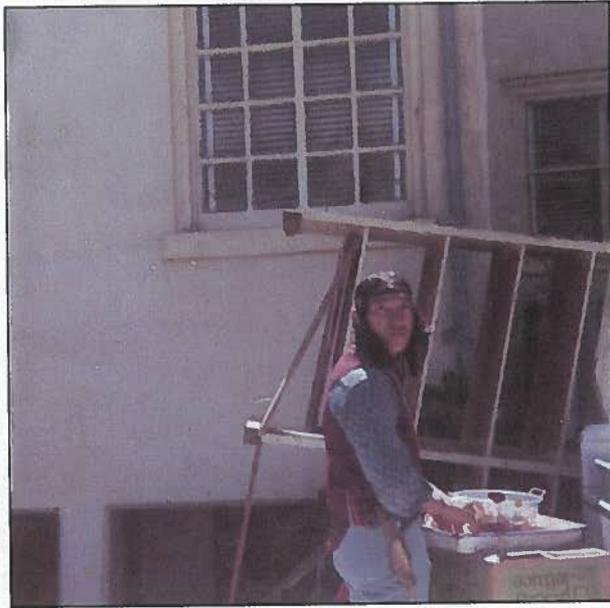
*Gary Oakes (Mohawk) holding  
a lit candle in cell block  
at Alcatraz. (August 1970)*



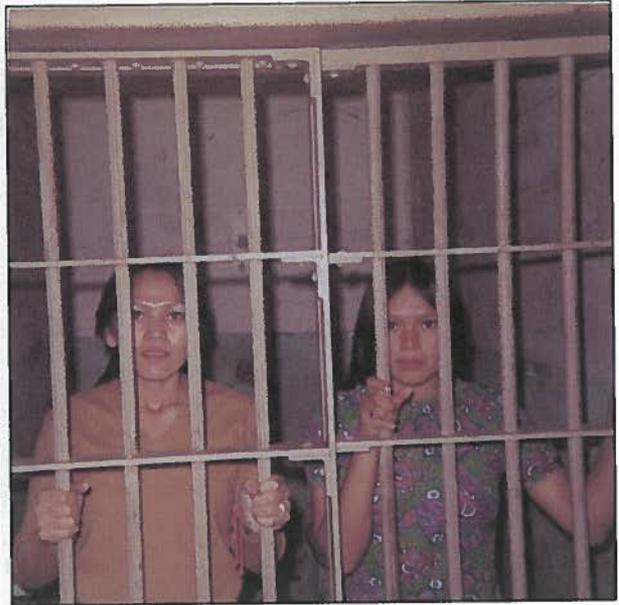
*My oldest sister Linda (Melinda)  
sitting in a cell block  
at Alcatraz. (August 1970)*



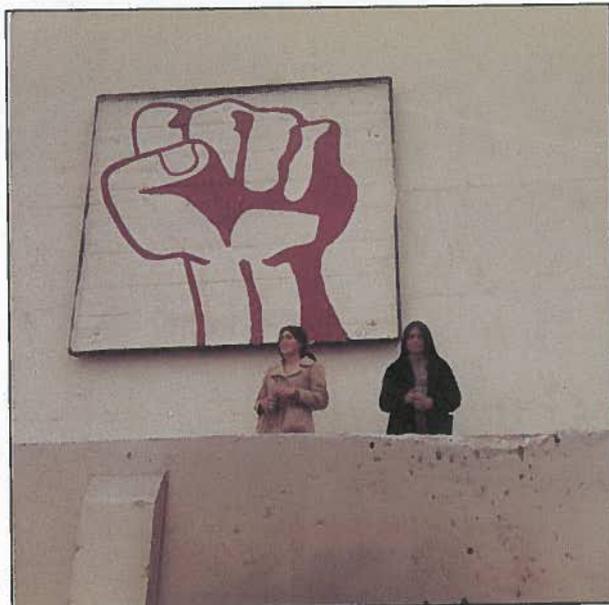
*Maudy Momaday and John Cut Nose  
in the Clearwater en route  
to Alcatraz. (1970)*



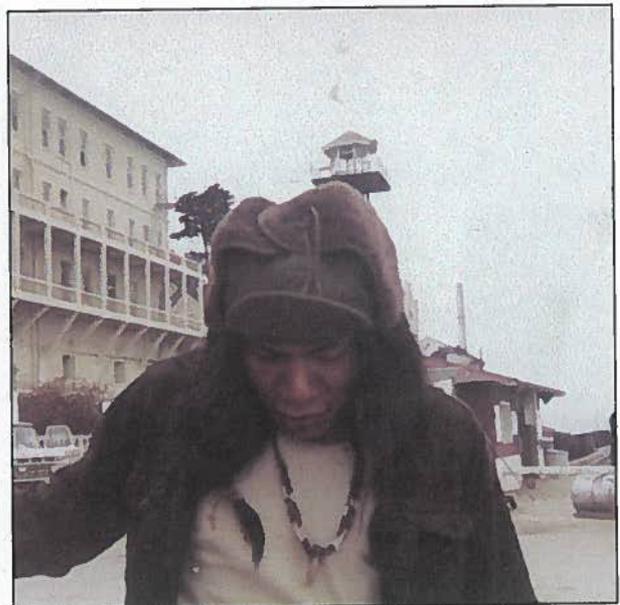
*"Musty" Williams cleaning and preparing fish for meals on Alcatraz. (July 1970)*



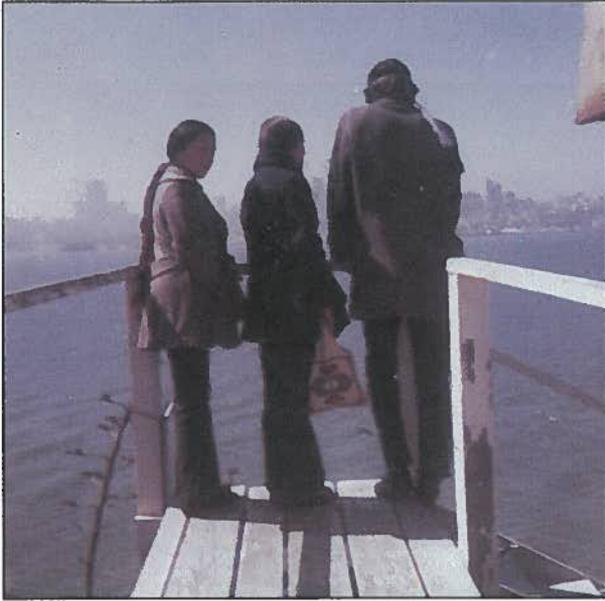
*Linda and me in a cell block on Alcatraz. (November 1970)*



*Linda and me in front of the Fist on Alcatraz. (1970)*



*John Whitefox (Choctaw) on the dock at Alcatraz. (November 1970)*



*Me, Mona and Micky  
overlooking San Francisco Bay  
from Alcatraz. (1970)*



*Micky and Mona  
in the mess hall  
at Alcatraz. (1970)*



*Mona and Linda  
preparing the sweat  
on Alcatraz. (1970)*



*The journey ends: Mona,  
me and Micky look back at  
Alcatraz from Pier 40. (1970)*