

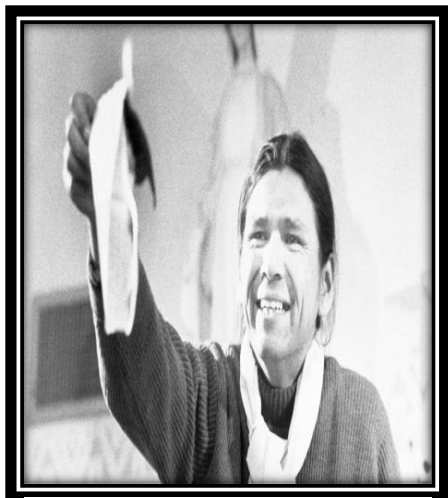
PROFILE OF RESISTANCE

DENNIS BANKS

soldier, activist

"I'm on this road for the rest of my life"

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BETTMANN ARCHIVE

Background Information

Born: April 12, 1937; died: October 29, 2017

Banks is a Native American from the Anishinabe Ojibwa tribe.ⁱ He spent the majority of his childhood being shuttled between boarding schools due to the federal policy of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. The focus on Western culture in school, and the lack of acknowledgement of his home culture, led to a feeling of detachment and uncertainty of his identity. Banks did not attend a university or college. Instead, he joined in the U.S. Air Force at 19. When he was discharged from the U.S. Air Force in the late 1950s, he faced problems that many Native Americans face, including poverty, alienation from his culture, and alcoholism.

Banks' Resistance

While in prison for burglary, he realized that he was passionate about fighting for the rights of Native Americans and he cofounded the American Indian Movement (AIM) in 1968ⁱⁱ. The goal of AIM was to preserve Native Americans culture and fight for civil rights. Banks' personal connection to the movement, having faced these experiences firsthand, fueled him to make things better for himself and for those after him. He did whatever it took in order to secure those rights, and oftentimes that meant legal trouble.

Banks was involved in many high-profile Native rights protests. He was part of the 1969 occupation of Alcatraz Island, and the 1973 occupation of Wounded Knee. He faced criminal charges for his protest actions, and he became a fugitive of the law. Banks fled to California, where the governor protected him from criminal charges in South Dakota.

Achievements

In 1985, Banks surrender to the police and served 18 months for his role in the 1973 protests. After his prison term, he worked as a drug and alcohol counselor on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. He has also acted in movies and released albums that feature new and traditional music. His legacy and passion continue to inspire those who followed.

Note about Photo: *In the above photo, Dennis Banks is burning a government proposal that would have let the AIM occupiers leave Wounded Knee in 1973. The Native American protesters then put the ashes into an envelope and sent it back to the government.*

Essential Questions

1. Banks was forced to assimilate to White American culture while attending boarding schools. When he returned to his reservation, he felt that his identity was uncertain. How can schools help to preserve cultural identities while also teaching new information?

2. Is breaking the law for a good cause acceptable? Why or why not?

3. ***"I'm on this road for the rest of my life"***
 - a. Banks is commenting on how he will always be an activist for American Indians. What is something that you will always be an activist for?

ⁱ Banks, Dennis J. (2019, October 24). Retrieved from <https://www.encyclopedia.com/people/social-sciences-and-law/law-biographies/dennis-j-banks>.

ⁱⁱ Banks, D. (1976). Interviews: Dennis Banks. *The Black Scholar*, 7(9), 28-36. Doi:10.1080/00064246.1976.114113835.