

DAKOTA ACCESS PIPELINE UNIT: RESOURCE SET 4: HANDOUT 1**LANADA WAR JACK INTERVIEW**

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Left: Dr. LaNada War Jack on Alcatraz Island, 1970.¹

Right: Dr. LaNada War Jack with her grandson, visiting Alcatraz Island in 2019.

Activist LaNada War Jack of the Bannock Nation Details Her Time Occupying Alcatraz

Men have been credited with taking Alcatraz, yet women were vital every step of the way.

BY DELILAH FRIEDLER

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Alcatraz Island is best known for the prison that once inhabited its rocky cliffs, overlooking San Francisco from about a mile out from the city's bay. But for Native Americans today, Alcatraz represents a crucial moment in history as the site of an occupation that captured mass attention at a time when their livelihoods and cultures were badly threatened by ongoing "termination" policies. From 1953 through 1964, the federal government terminated the status of more than 100 tribes, withdrawing aid and services and confiscating millions of acres of Native land.

The prison shut down in 1963, and six years later, Alcatraz was claimed by Lakota activists under an 1868 treaty allowing Natives to appropriate surplus federal land. In 1969, a group of Native students stormed the island by boat, launching a 19-month occupation that sparked a chain reaction of Indigenous activism throughout the country. Often, men like Richard Oakes and Adam Nordwall have been credited with taking Alcatraz, yet women were vital every step of the way. *Teen Vogue* sat down with LaNada War Jack of the Bannock Nation (formerly LaNada Means) — who one Alcatraz vet called "the real leader of the occupation" — to dig deeper on this story.

¹ <https://www.empowermentworks.org/womens-history-month-2018.html>

Teen Vogue: What was the motivation for taking the island?

LaNada War Jack: We wanted to bring to the forefront that every single one of [more than 500] treaties were broken by the federal government. We were going through the termination era, when the states imposed taxes and would eventually take over our land. It was pretty dangerous legislation. They took [a lot of] California, Oregon, and Washington. At the same time, they were practicing sterilization on women through the Indian Health Service.

[Prior to] the 1890s, they made our religion and culture illegal. We'd been living in that environment, just going through the genocide, and they passed laws to take all the children and put them into boarding schools to assimilate us. It was their way of getting rid of the "Indian problem." They recruited directly out of the boarding schools and put us into cities. I became the first Native-American student at UC Berkeley. I was able to recruit about 12 [more] Native students. We set up our own organization on campus, joined the Third World Strike, and successfully negotiated our first department of ethnic studies.

TV: Whose idea was it to take Alcatraz?

LWJ: After the penitentiary was vacated, the city of San Francisco was going to turn it over to a billionaire. The Native-American community was pretty upset, because it was claimed already by the Sioux. It was like breaking another treaty right in front of our faces. Adam Nordwall decided to sail around the island to have the claim recognized. As students, we wanted more than just a publicity stunt. We wanted to actually take the island, so we did. We had boats lined up and called students from all the UC campuses. They came with their families, and we started our 19-month occupation.

TV: What was it like living on the island?

LWJ: A lot of donations were coming in, but the Coast Guard stopped us from landing. They took away the water barge and the power source we had. Eventually, we had so much support that they stopped trying to stop everyone. The main thing was to get food cooked, dishes washed, [and supplies carried]. Just day-to-day survival. I was able to stay in school. I had my son with me, he was two or three years old. We would hitchhike off the island on Sundays when the sailboats came out. I'd go to the university and turn in my papers, take whatever exams, and then catch a boat back to the island.

TV: What role did women play in the occupation?

LWJ: There were a lot of women active and involved in setting up the kitchen and the school. Stella Leach and her family were out there; she ran the medical facility. Grace Thorpe was there, working with public relations, trying to get her father's [football legend Jim Thorpe] medals back. We had a whole group going out to Pit River, where [energy corporation] PG&E was taking over [the Pit River Tribe's] lands. The police came and arrested them. It took about six of them to carry Grace because she just sat down and wouldn't leave! She was pretty instrumental.

TV: What were the occupation's effects?

LWJ: [President Richard] Nixon stopped the termination laws and implemented the 1975 Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act so we could run our own programs on the reservations. He implemented a lot of important legislation and doubled and tripled the funding — the first and only president that did that.

It was a turning point toward self-determination. We were being completely assimilated, so we had to stop and retain our identification as Native people. To find out that you have a culture and it's connected to the earth, where you recognize the balance of life, it was a spiritual revolution. People were inspired throughout the nation. Standing Rock was representative of that spirit of resistance, continuing not only from Alcatraz, but from our ancient people. Alcatraz was nonviolent; we didn't have any guns.

Then the American Indian Movement went on and did Wounded Knee (an armed occupation). The anger was so high, like a raging forest fire...it would have been OK if I [had been] able to have a word in edgewise, but I didn't. I was a woman and they were following the patriarchy. They didn't even know about the matriarchy.

TV: Can you say more about matriarchy?

LWJ: That's just living within the natural law, and the natural law is balance. It's the male and the female, not like patriarchy, which is made up — and is all male. Matriarchy is a concept that all Indigenous people worldwide practiced at one time until they were corrupted. Ours was taken away under the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, in which they set up our tribal governments in the same format as any other municipality. Even though the men won't recognize it, they're going through that colonization process and they have to be woken up.

We have to acknowledge what's happening in terms of the murdered and missing indigenous women (MMIW). It's because of all the patriarchy and how the men look down upon us. We represent Mother Earth, and the way that we get treated is the way that society treats the earth.