Cover: In this detail from an undated postcard, people and animals alike take advantage of Chicago’s public fountains. Image courtesy of Leslie Coburn.
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Crossroads for a Culture
Chicago provided a home for a diverse group of American Indians during the Progressive Era.

ROSALYN R. LAPIER AND DAVID R. M. BECK

For many Indians, like this group waiting for a train in 1903, Chicago was a common stop when traveling by rail.
by the beginning of the twentieth century, Chicago had emerged as one of the largest and busiest cities in the United States. As the railroad capital of America and a rapidly growing industrial center, it appealed to immigrants and migrants alike. American Indians were no exception. Many came to Chicago seeking employment. Others traveled through the metropolis via the numerous railroads, usually going from western reservation communities to eastern cities. Some passed through in their work as entertainers, while others were on their way to Washington, DC, to meet with federal authorities. A number stayed in Chicago, either temporarily or permanently.

This occurred during a time of great change in Indian country. As policy makers and reformers began to realize that American Indians were not disappearing from the American landscape, they shifted their efforts to assimilation. This was done to a large degree through the boarding school experiments that removed children from their families and community environments to inculcate them with American cultural values. While this process often proved destructive to tribal communities, it also created an educated Indian intelligentsia, who ironically worked hard to incorporate tribal values into modern life. Those who came to Chicago tried both to wrest control of what it meant to be Indian from non-Indian definition and to help carve out a place for American Indians in contemporary society, which now included the urban landscape. The city of Chicago played a central role both regionally and nationally as a place where individual American Indians during and after the Progressive Era asserted their position in modern American society. The stories of these remarkable individuals shed light on the development of a new type of experience and leadership in Indian America.

Simon Pokagon

Simon Pokagon, a Potawatomi leader from Michigan, did not live permanently in the city. Chicago, however, was the traditional territory of the Potawatomi, lost in a treaty in 1833. Throughout his life Pokagon spent significant time in his ancient homeland. He was among the first modern American Indian leaders to assert his convictions about the status of American Indians and the responsibilities of the U.S. government. He used his role as a traditional leader and respected orator to promote Indian issues and concerns, most publically in 1893.

In that year, Chicago celebrated the four hundredth anniversary of the European “discovery” of the Americas with the World’s Columbian Exposition. As part of the fair’s educational function, American Indians and other ethnic groups considered inferior or less civilized were displayed on the Midway Plaisance as part of “the illustrated history of the progress of the human race, and its development from the cave dweller to the man who is the best embodiment of the civilization of the nineteenth century.”

The displays of the American Indian Village on the Midway and the American Indian school exhibited in the Ethnology Building were developed by ethnologists with the cooperation of the United States government. According to one non-Indian observer, “educated” Indians were used in these displays, and most of them had to be taught the “old” customs of music, dwelling, and dress by the ethnologists. One guidebook to the fair urged visitors to see “the almost extinct civilization if civilization it is to be called [of the] ‘noble red man’ . . . before he achieves annihilation, or at least loss of identity.”

A nascent academic field in the Progressive Era, anthropology took a key role in portraying for the visiting public one of the key interpretations of the fair, “the idea of progress, especially as manifested in the assumed triumph of civilization on the North American continent.” Columbia University’s renowned anthropologist Franz Boas sent some fifty trained ethnologists into American Indian communities in the United States and Canada to collect a variety of information that could be used to por-
Six decades after the treaty signing, Simon Pokagon argued against the portrayal of Indians as uncivilized savages by the fair’s organizers. A Catholic, Pokagon had studied for three years at Notre Dame, one at Oberlin College, and two at Twinsburg College in Ohio; he spoke five languages, was a good organist, and generally considered to have the best, or rather most Europeanized, education in his generation of Indians. He attended the opening of the fair, lamenting that Indians were not allowed to participate with representatives and exhibits of their own. After witnessing the opening ceremonies, the story goes, Pokagon walked through the fairgrounds with a heavy heart. A little Indian girl tried to cheer him by giving him a bunch of flowers. “This simple act,” one observer said, perhaps with some embellishment, “inspired him to write the Red Man’s Greeting.” The “greeting,” originally titled the Red Man’s Rebuke, was a bitter document of Indian–white relations printed on birch bark and widely distributed on the Midway. Pokagon began:

Simon Pokagon presented this copy of the Red Man’s Rebuke and the two birch bark books at the right to the Chicago Historical Society in 1899.

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In behalf of my people, the American Indians, I hereby declare to you, the pale-faced race that has usurped our lands and homes, that we have no spirit to celebrate with you the great Columbian Fair now being held in this Chicago city, the wonder of the world.

No; sooner would we hold high joy-day over the graves of our departed fathers, than to celebrate our own funeral, the discovery of America.

Carter Harrison, Chicago’s mayor, read this moving document, as did a women’s group at the fair, and they invited Pokagon to consult with them about the representation of Indians. Harrison claimed to be descended from Pocahontas, and he was sympathetic to Indian causes. On September 25, the day before the sixtieth anniversary of the 1833 treaty, Pokagon spoke with fair representatives who were determined to include a positive portrayal of Indians at the fair.

I am glad that you are making an effort, at last, to have the educated people of my race take part in the great celebration. That will be much better for the good of our people, in the hearts of the dominant race, than war-whoops and battle-dances, such as I today witnessed on Midway Plaisance. It will encourage our friends, and encourage us. . . . We wish to rejoice with you, and will accept your invitation with gratitude. The world’s people, from what they have so far seen of us on the Midway, will regard us as savages; but they shall yet know that we are human as well as they.

Harrison subsequently invited Pokagon to celebrate Chicago Day in October. This day drew the largest crowds yet, and Harrison and Pokagon both made speeches calling for greater understanding between the races. Harrison also promised Pokagon that he would try to retrieve some of the money owed by the federal government to Pokagon’s band of Potawatomis for the ceding of Chicago in 1833. Pokagon had spent much of his adult life pursuing that goal: he personally visited Presidents Lincoln and Grant and even won a court case recovering a portion of the money. Harrison invited Pokagon to return at the mayor’s own expense for the fair’s closing to discuss Indian–white cooperation. But as Pokagon rode the train into Chicago that historic night, Carter Harrison was shot to death by a disgruntled would-be city employee. Pokagon lamented that Harrison was like a brother to him. At a memorial for Harrison on the fairgrounds, Pokagon said, “He alone at the fair welcomed those of my race who have climbed the heights of manhood. . . . On the natal day of his city, he bade the Pottawatomies [sic] and all progressive Indians welcome. To-day we mourn him, for every Indian has lost a friend.”
Photographer Carlos Gentile rescued a boy named Wassaja from Pima raiders. He raised and educated the child, whom he renamed Carlos Montezuma. This undated formal photograph by Gentile shows Wassaja with Alessandro Salvini, a successful Italian American actor.
It would be a long time before a mayor of Chicago would again extend such a welcome to the first Americans.

After the fair, in the few remaining years of his life, Pokagon continued to encourage Chicagoans to view the Indian history of their city in a more sympathetic manner. In 1897 he arranged with Edward G. Mason, the president of the Chicago Historical Society, to come to Chicago and give a Potawatomi perspective of the fight at Fort Dearborn. According to one observer, Pokagon resented the fact that the battle in which Indians fought to retain their homeland was called a massacre. He was unable to make this speech because Mason died before the event could be arranged.

Pokagon initiated a process that became increasingly common over the coming years, in which Indian leaders attempted to correct the American understanding of both the history of Chicago and the role Indians played in that history. He used his modern education to articulate a tribal perspective on the place of American Indians in contemporary society. He looked backward and forward at the same time, attempting to define Indian society as positively contributing to America’s past development, while asserting a relevant role for Indians as active members of modern society in Chicago and the larger nation. This process was further advanced by one of Pokagon’s good friends, a man who came to live in Chicago for almost twenty-five years at the end of Pokagon’s life: Carlos Montezuma.

**Carlos Montezuma, Physician**

A group of skilled, educated individuals formed the core of an evolving American Indian community within Chicago, despite small numbers. The 1910 census counted only 108 American Indians within a population of more than two million, and by 1930 that number stood only at 246, yet their influence far exceeded their numbers. A number were educated in boarding schools, although the most well-known American Indian leader to live in Chicago and emerge from the Progressive Era, Dr. Carlos Montezuma, followed a different route. Montezuma, a Yavapai man given an Aztec name by his white childhood guardian, was renowned as one of the best stomach surgeons in the United States. As Montezuma tells it, his formal education began somewhat accidentally.

In the year 1871 I was taken from the most warlike tribe in America and placed in the midst of civilization in Chicago. My greatest wish was to understand the paper talking, as it was interpreted to me. I often saw boys and girls go to and from the school-house. I had no idea that they all had to be taught, but I had a little suspicious idea of the house. One morning in April, the boy with whom I had associated persuaded me to come into the school-yard that morning to play marbles by saying that “I could win piles of marbles if I did!” So I consented.
That led him into the school, where an insatiable desire for knowledge propelled him eventually to graduate from the Chicago Medical School. Henceforth, he was determined to better himself professionally and to use his education to advocate on behalf of American Indian people.

Montezuma took on several roles that lay firmly in the tradition of tribal leadership: those of advocating for tribal rights before entities such as the federal government; caring for less fortunate tribal members; and hosting visiting tribal members. The difference was that while traditional leaders did these things almost exclusively for and within their own tribes, Montezuma worked on behalf of a multitribal population from an urban platform. He reflected a traditional tribal role transferred to an urban setting and, in the process, established a model carried on by future tribal leaders in Chicago.

Montezuma was undeniably the individual who fought most consistently for Indian rights in the first quarter of the twentieth century in Chicago. The great passion of Montezuma’s life was fighting against the policies of the federal Indian Service (also known as the Indian Bureau or Office of Indian Affairs); in fact, fighting for the abolition of the service. Like the reformers of the Progressive Era, Montezuma believed Indians should become fully assimilated citizens of the United States and that the major barrier to this was the service itself, which so completely controlled Indian lives. Montezuma thought Indians could and should control their own destiny.

In 1911, Montezuma was a founding member of a national organization headquartered in Columbus, Ohio, the Society of American Indians (SAI). SAI membership consisted solely of American Indians, although honorary membership was extended to non-Indian supporters.
To a significant extent Montezuma was a product of Progressive Era reformers. He believed that because Indians were stereotyped as savage and backward, traditional Indian cultural practices (including music and art) should be abandoned. He wrote articles for Chicago newspapers protesting the building of an Indian art center at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania. He argued that the art offered “only evidence of that dark period in Indian life of which the best that can be said is that it ought to be forgotten in the march toward the more advanced life.” Not all Indians agreed with Montezuma; and it must be remembered that Montezuma spent almost his entire life living in urban society, maintaining a longtime friendship and alliance with Richard Henry Pratt, the assimilationist Indian fighter turned reformer who founded Carlisle.

Montezuma believed the best hope for Indians to escape the state of degradation in which the government kept them lay within white American society. The dilemma is clearest in a letter from one man who disagreed with Montezuma, but who also highly respected him. Arthur C. Parker, the Seneca ethnologist, wrote in March 1913 to ask if it would be all right, in Montezuma’s view, to teach Indian folk music to Indian children—if this music was also taught in white schools. Parker was obliquely asking whether Montezuma would support the perpetuation of Indian culture if whites stopped defining that culture as savage or backward. Unfortunately, there is no record of Montezuma’s reply. Despite his belief that assimilation, as he defined it, provided the best opportunities for Indians to survive in modern American society, Montezuma never completely gave up ties to his home reservation community or to his friends.

Besides his loud advocacy work on the national level, Montezuma played a lower key yet perhaps more significant role in Chicago, both within and outside his profession as a physician. When a train carrying members of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show crashed near Melrose Park in 1904, for example, he was called upon in his capacity as physician. Among the dead and injured were eighteen Indians, show members from Pine Ridge, South Dakota. The Indian Affairs agent for Pine Ridge, John R. Brennan, had collaborated with the railroad company to make a quick settlement between the railroad and survivors and families of the deceased. In it, they were awarded a much lower amount in compensation than white victims of similar situations. This was possible because Indian people, many of whom lacked U.S. citizenship, were wards of the government. Their agent had near total control over most of the important decisions in their lives.
Carlisle was a boarding school. It removed young Indian children from reservations and educated them as Europeanized members of society. As at other industrial schools, the Carlisle curriculum emphasized training for domestic and manual labor. These photographs, and the preceding portrait of Richard Pratt, were taken by Frances Johnston at the school’s height in 1901.

While many former students were grateful for their education, Carlisle children often also felt alienated from both white and Indian society.

These girls are practicing for working lives as maidservants, as well as learning how to run their own homes in a non-Indian fashion.
In addition to the emphasis on practical training, children at Carlisle received instruction in the arts and sciences. As adults, they were expected to earn a living and help others of their race.

This home economics class is teaching girls to prepare a standard hearty breakfast of 1901: rolled oats, beefsteak, and coffee.
Besides providing medical attention and informal legal advice for Indians in need, Montezuma served as the Chicago connection for Indians passing through the city on their way east or west and for those who got stranded here for one reason or another. If a tribal delegation changed trains in Chicago, Montezuma might meet the members at one station and help them find another. When tribal members were waylaid in Chicago, abandoned by fly-by-night wild west shows for example, he might help them find their way home or find a job locally. He seems to have made a special effort to meet children going to or from boarding school, primarily Carlisle, where he himself had worked before moving to Chicago. Children traveling to these schools from out west often needed to pass through Chicago along the way. These dual roles of advocacy and social service, which made up such a major part of Montezuma’s personal life, were needed by Indians in Chicago as times changed.

Several instances of Montezuma’s helpful generosity have entered the official record, reflecting his activities large and small over the quarter-century he lived in Chicago. For example, in 1899 he wrote to Commissioner of Indian Affairs W. A. Jones, recommending Emily Peake for a job at a Chicago warehouse operated by the Indian Service where goods were held before shipment to western reservations. Peake clerked at the Oneida Indian School at the time and he considered her “the most apt pupil [ever] graduated from Carlisle.”

The people injured in 1904 thought the decision made on their behalf unfair. A committee including Luther Standing Bear, a Sioux from South Dakota, and three others contacted Dr. Montezuma, asking him to intervene. Montezuma wrote to the Indian Service on April 19, 1904, requesting permission to attend the injured Indians. In the same letter, he also pointed out that Brennan’s brother had a connection with the Buffalo Bill show and, thus, the compensation might not have been awarded impartially.

Montezuma and three others sent a letter on May 6 protesting Brennan’s handling of the case and demanding an investigation. Montezuma then sent his nine-page medical report to the Indian Bureau on May 19. It detailed the injuries, present conditions, prospects of recovery, and suffering of the fifteen survivors of the accident.

Ultimately, Montezuma’s attempts to advocate on behalf of the Melrose Park victims were unsuccessful. The bureau accepted the settlement Brennan had made, despite Montezuma’s detailed case. In a final letter on May 20, the cover letter for the “Estimate of Compensation Properly Due Indians Injured in Wreck on Chicago and Northwestern Company’s Tracks Near Maywood, Illinois,” Montezuma argued that Indians should be compensated the same amount as if they were white and that the settlement should be based on circumstances, not race or prejudice. The government, in the final analysis, was not prepared to admit that Indians had the same rights as white people.

One of Carlisle’s biggest successes was its football team, which nurtured celebrated athlete and Olympian Jim Thorpe (center).
Carlos Montezuma recognized the interrelationship of his career as both a physician and an Indian activist early on. He believed Indians needed to be conventionally educated to succeed in American society and facilitate their escape from the grinding poverty and colonial oppression the Indian Bureau helped maintain. Montezuma saw professional, educated Indians as the key to a positive Indian future, as he wrote to the pupils at Carlisle while he was yet a student at the Chicago Medical School in 1887. “I never have doubted that the great problem of the Indian question is capable of solution if the advantages which were open to me could be extended to all Indian youth,” he told them.

**William Jones, Anthropologist**

William Jones was a Fox Indian born on the Sauk and Fox Reservation in Oklahoma in 1871, to parents of mixed Fox and European backgrounds. He was raised by his paternal grandmother Katiqua, a daughter of the Fox chief Wa shi ho wa, after his mother’s early death. After Katiqua also passed away, he attended various boarding schools: a Quaker-run Indian school in Wabash, Indiana, the Hampton Institute in Virginia, and Phillips Academy Andover. Outside of the school year, he lived as a cowboy in Oklahoma. He later earned a scholarship to Harvard.

Jones originally planned to become a medical doctor, so that he could return to his home community and provide quality professional medical services. But after meeting Frederick W. Putnam, Harvard’s Peabody Professor of Archaeology and Ethnology, he found he had a gift for the incipient field of linguistics and changed the course of his career. “I am afraid my dreams of ever becoming a doctor are all thrown aside. The field he opened out to me is certainly wide, with room enough for hundreds of intelligent workers. There is an opening without any question, and so my little mind is sent drifting in another direction.”

Jones’s friend and biographer Henry Rideout later observed that Jones had a new goal in life after this meeting with Putnam: “He should return to the Indians not as a healer, but as the historian of their legends, the recorder of their language, and the interpreter of their most reverent beliefs.” To accomplish his goals, Jones gained a Presidential Scholar award to study under the internationally eminent anthropologist Franz Boas at Columbia University in New York. There he earned a master’s degree in 1901 and a doctorate in ethnology in 1904. He was the first American Indian to earn an anthropological degree.

Jones quickly became the foremost Algonquian language expert in academia. He had a knack for languages and a good understanding of the protocol needed to conduct respectful research in tribal communities. His first research had been among his relatives, and thus he learned early to use the proper manners that are critical when in the field. Boas himself said of Jones that he “will presumably remain our principal source of information on the Central Algonquian.” But Jones could find no permanent employment in his subject in North America, making his future uncertain. To gain funding, he had to look for research subjects abroad.

Jones came to Chicago in 1906 after meeting George A. Dorsey of the Field Museum of Natural History. Dorsey offered Jones a job conducting field work abroad, with his choice of assignment. Jones selected the Philippines as his ultimate destination. In the meantime, he secured short-term funding from the Carnegie Institute to write up the results of his previous research. He thus spent his time before leaving for the Philippines in Chicago at the Field Museum (then located in Jackson Park) working on his own research and writings. He lived nearby and enjoyed the lakefront environment. He made friends readily, as he always had; his developing friendship with Dorsey lasted to the end of his short life.

Jones appreciated the natural beauty of Chicago. He portrayed his surroundings, much of which had been created for the 1893 fair, in pleasant terms.

The part of the city I am in is like an inland country town with lots of open air and space; and so I never
Jones’s life and career were cut tragically short when he was murdered by Ilongots in March 1909 during a freightling dispute on a collecting trip in the Filipino interior. In his last weeks, as he experienced the end of a hot southern hemisphere summer, he penned a letter to Dorsey recalling the cold Chicago winters.

If I remember it, this is the time [March] that the winds sweep down State Street, the chief janitor is economical with the coal, and the pipes gurgle lazily. I hope none of you are frozen . . .

One of the things that Progressive Era Indians increasingly believed to be important was to show Indian culture, lifeways, and history in a positive light. They hoped to end the stereotypical views the non-Indian world held about them and provide a source of personal pride for all Indians. Dr. William Jones’s research with his own tribe as well as other indigenous groups helped to show that Indians were not backward peoples but had developed complex cultures worthy of academic study and perpetuation. Although Jones’s field of study opposed Montezuma’s assimilationist views, his pre-eminent scholarly pursuits represented just the kind of work that Montezuma strove to validate.
Francis Cayou, Athletic Director

Francis Cayou, an Omaha Indian originally from Nebraska, probably first came to Chicago when he worked as a guard at the world’s fair in the summer of 1893. It is possible that Richard Henry Pratt recruited him there, because he enrolled at Carlisle the next fall. While at Carlisle, Cayou became a football and track star. He graduated in 1896 and matriculated at the University of Illinois in the fall of 1899. Although he attended the university for more than three years, he never graduated. He instead began his career as a coach and athletic director, first at the University of Illinois as a freshman coach in 1903, then as director of athletics at Wabash College in Indiana from 1904 to 1908, and finally holding the same position at Washington University in St. Louis from 1908 to 1913. Cayou then worked for the A. G. Spalding & Bros. Company in Chicago for two years and finally took a job at the Great Lakes Naval Training Center as an athletic director. Cayou’s work reflected an important concept of the reform era, that physical fitness was a key facet in the moral development of a healthy Christian citizenry. The introduction of this “muscular Christianity” to Indian boarding schools became a prominent feature of assimilationist efforts at this time. Cayou stayed at Great Lakes Naval Training Base until he moved to Oklahoma in 1925. There he became a leader of the Native American Church, a religious group whose sacraments include the hallucinogenic peyote cactus. He may have become a devotee of this belief system when he was in Chicago and associated with resident peyotists such as Winnebago tribal member Oliver LaMere.

During the twelve years he lived in the Chicago area, Cayou also served as the president of the city’s first two Indian organizations, the Indian Fellowship League (IFL) and the Grand Council Fire of American Indians (GCFAI). The IFL was created by a mixed group of American Indians and white Chicago residents on May 6, 1919, at the Chicago Historical Society. It showed the diversity of Chicago’s Indian population even at that early date; its members included American Indians from thirty-five tribes. More than one hundred people attended its first meeting, including Carlos Montezuma and the visiting Dr. Charles Eastman, president of the SAI. The presence of these nationally prominent Indian leaders at their first meeting fed the IFL’s high hopes to work effectively on behalf of all Indians.

The members immediately decided that “the principal objective of [the organization] should be the abolishment of the Indian Bureau System.” This view came no doubt from Montezuma. Another hope Indians held for the organization was articulated by LaMere: the eradication of scholarly and published stereotypes of American Indians. The league remained primarily assimilationist in its goals and methods, however, probably a reflection of the perspective of the white participants among the founders and perhaps Carlos Montezuma and Francis Cayou as well. In 1922, Cayou wrote, “One hundred years from now the Indian will be practically extinct. He is living in a stage of transition from his aboriginal life to one of absorption into the famous American melting pot. It is another case of survival of the fittest.”

To a large extent the IFL was dominated publically by its white membership. Only one other Indian besides Cayou ever took an official leadership role in the IFL. Walter Battie, or Sheet Lightning, was a graduate of the Hampton Institute in Virginia and the secretary of the Sac and Fox tribe in Iowa. He served as vice president in 1920.

The IFL existed until 1923, when it was superseded by the GCFAI. Cayou played a leadership role in that organization as well.

The GCFAI had both educational and social service functions. Many Indians who moved to cities found difficulties upon their arrival. Before other relief agencies or government programs helped them, organizations like the GCFAI offered limited social services, providing relief
to Indians who were sick and helping the unemployed find work. It also maintained a loan fund, an Indian scholarship fund, a Christmas Cheer Fund, sponsored calls to hospitalized Indians, and sometimes covered funeral expenses.

Cayou served as the GCFAI’s first president, or “Chief of Chiefs,” a post he held for two years. Cayou’s leadership within these organizations was perhaps premised on the belief he held while living in Chicago (and, like Montezuma, apparently changed later) that the old Indian cultural ways were dead, and Indians must Americanize in order to survive as individuals. His view, like those of Progressive Era reformers, was that assimilation represented the only way for American Indians to avoid permanent relegation to America’s past. In 1914, when he applied for a job at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School (as director of athletics, a position that was ultimately discontinued), he wrote to emphasize both his ability as a coach and a leader among non-Indians and Indians alike:

I have tasted the bitter and the sweets of life and have I hope & believe arrived at the age of genuine reason.

I have been a leader and consulor [sic] of young men (and they have not been Indians either) these ten years, and I feel sure that not one of them have aught to say against me.

Cayou was a product of the Progressive Era reform movement, a man who worked hard on behalf of Indians, in a field that the reformers deemed of high value. He was at the helm of the first two Chicago Indian organizations as the Indian Citizenship Act became law in 1924, granting universal United States citizenship to American Indians. His efforts, like those of the reformers with whom he worked, were aimed at developing Indian citizenship in more than a simply legal sense.

**Scott Henry Peters, Businessman**

After Cayou’s tenure as president ended, Scott Henry Peters took on his key leadership role within the GCFAI. He left a stronger record of action than Cayou, and in his reign as president we can see the beginnings of the division between Indian and non-Indian members of the organization. A Chippewa Indian originally from Isabella County, Michigan, he was educated at Mount Pleasant and at Carlisle, where he learned to be a tailor. He opened up his own cleaning and tailor shop on the suburban North Shore of Chicago in about 1905 and lived in Wilmette, where he was considered a prominent businessman.

After he became president of the GCFAI in 1925, Peters involved himself in numerous Indian activities in the Chicago area. His writings and speeches during his eight-year tenure illuminate his thoughts and feelings about being an Indian and the responsibilities he felt in running an Indian organization. Peters was concerned primarily with advancing Indian rights, improving the conditions under which Indians lived, and increasing public awareness of major issues regarding modern Indians both on
and off reservations. He and the GCFAI represented a new era in Indian leadership, as Indians attempted to take control of both their own future and the outside world’s definition of “Indian.”

Perhaps because of the poverty and isolating family tragedies he experienced as a child, Peters felt it was the duty of all people to “encourage the young Indian to leave the reservation and . . . fight his battle of life on his [own] merits.” He believed that Indians would find a better life off their tribal lands and saw himself as a model of Indian entrepreneurship. He was living proof that Indians could adapt to modern America: “Give my people the same opportunity that I have had, and they will meet you face to face in this social and business world.”

But Peters’s views went much deeper than those informing Progressive Era reformers of total Indian assimilation. Although in retrospect his actions may seem to reflect the assimilationist philosophy of the time, his opinions on the capabilities of Indians were different than the non-Indian view. He was a strong proponent of the potential of Indians. Other boarding school–educated Indians of his time, like Montezuma, felt the same way, and many increasingly began to view the history and culture of Indians as an important contribution to America.

While Peters was president, the GCFAI continued the observance of Indian Day, a practice begun by the Indian Fellowship League. In 1919 the Illinois legislature passed a law recognizing the fourth Friday in September as American Indian Day, and by 1928 the GCFAI held its annual celebrations at the Chicago Historical Society for the third time. As usual several Indians attended in “ceremonial dress,” and a “peace pipe ritual” was performed. More than one hundred Indians and two hundred non-Indians attended. By most counts, half the Chicago Indian population was in attendance. There was also a strong effort to show living Indians contributing to modern American society. The evening’s speaker, William Kershaw, was a Menominee attorney who had recently won the Democratic nomination for Congress in the Wisconsin primaries and whose patriotic 1915 poem “The Indian’s Salute to His Country” became a staple text in Chicago classrooms at Indian Day celebrations for years to come. That year the GCFAI also helped stage programs of songs and stories at schools across Chicago.

Peters’s initiative had begun a year earlier when “Big Bill” Thompson ran for re-election as the mayor of Chicago and accused superintendent of schools William McAndrew of promoting pro-British “propaganda” in public school history books. Thompson proposed that the books be rewritten from an “America First” viewpoint. After the election, in response to this nativistic movement, Peters headed a committee of Indians who presented their point of view to the mayor.

We do not know if school histories are pro-British, but we do know that they are unjust to the life of our people—the American Indians. . . .

White men call Indians savages. What is civilization? Its marks are a noble religion and philosophy, original arts, stirring music, rich story and legend. We had these. Then we were not savages, but a civilized race. . . .

Peters saw the textbook debate as an opportunity to advance his views on the bias of American history and a chance to change the way non-Indians viewed Indians of the past. He insisted not only was the historical Indian a man, but that Indians of the present were men and women capable of making important decisions regarding their own futures.

In his speech at the Indian Day celebrations of 1929, Peters continued his appeal to Indians to move off reservations. He insisted that the federal government should stop imposing farming on Indians, who should become managers of their own affairs. In that speech he also proposed a convention of all the tribes in Chicago in September 1930 to discuss self-determination.

This gathering is to insure that the voice of our people shall be heard in determining our own destiny. Within the last year much light has been thrown on the conditions prevailing among the Indian people, principally through the efforts of non-Indian people. It is necessary that the Indians themselves discuss their own affairs and set forth their views, that justice may be obtained.

All tribes were asked to send a representative, and important Indian leaders were asked to attend individually.

Despite this political slant, most of Indian Day was set aside for entertainment. Indians appeared in full regalia, “demonstrating the primitive lore of the deep forest and wide plains” in the Art Institute’s Fullerton Hall. These demonstrations, strongly supported by the GCFAI’s non-Indian membership, tended to undercut the strength of Peters’s message of modernity. The latter also made better copy for general newspapers such as the Chicago Daily Tribune, which circulated among the larger population and thus helped shape public perceptions.

Peters became increasingly ambivalent about the role that non-Indians should play in what he referred to as “the movement.” He insisted that it should be up to Indians to control their destiny. Regulating image was an important part of controlling the place of Indians in American society. The early urban alliances of Indians and non-Indians were becoming strained as leaders like Peters pushed for Indian rights, while non-Indian members continued to participate in activities and meetings that fulfilled their romantic views of Indians as ecologists.
As an opera singer, Tsinina Blackstone (above in an undated portrait) used her fame to support tribal women’s interests.
who could help establish a forest preserve movement or craftsmen who sold bead and leather work. Indian leaders also faced discouragement when they followed the rules established by white society. Their efforts at assimilation were often met with racial prejudice, either through individuals or within institutions. By 1934 Peters shifted his efforts to government work, taking a job with John Collier’s Office of Indian Affairs as a relocation officer who found jobs for Indians in both rural and urban areas away from reservation communities.

**Tsianina Blackstone, Opera Singer**

Women’s clubs in America organized their membership as college clubs, ethnic clubs, professional and civic clubs, or clubs to work on specific issues. By the 1930s Illinois and local women’s clubs had supported the work of American Indians for a number of years. In March 1930, American Indian women organized their own club, the First Daughters of America. The two key founders were Tsianina Blackstone, a well-known Cherokee Creek operatic mezzo-soprano, and Anna Fitzgerald, a Chippewa woman whose husband Charles, an attorney, helped with the legal work of the organization’s establishment.

The club had several purposes according to its charter. It was formed to contest prevailing stereotypes perpetuated by wild west shows, Hollywood, and school books; to support Indian art and culture; and “to emulate the supreme qualities of American Indian womanhood.” The First Daughters consisted entirely of American Indians, although non-Indians were occasionally given honorary membership for providing aid to the club. It also sponsored an affiliated junior club of “white girls who are interested in the welfare work.” The First Daughters numbered some ten members when counts were provided in newspaper reports. Like most women’s clubs, they held meetings and events at the homes of members or at stylish tearooms or restaurants such as the Narcissus Club at Marshall Field and Company.

Blackstone, the founding president of the First Daughters, was also referred to as Princess Tsianina, which she found amusing. “I’m not really an Indian princess,” she once laughingly told a Chicago Tribune reporter. “You see, there is no such thing as an Indian princess. My father was a Cherokee Creek chief, and for that reason the white man conferred the title upon me and it has always remained.” Prominent Indian women had long been referred to as princesses, in sources dating back to Pocahontas’s time, just as prominent Indian men had long been referred to as chiefs by members of the larger society.

Blackstone was a popular performer who “outfitted herself in a buckskin beaded dress of her own design that fairly typified the public’s expectations of a typical ‘Indian princess.’” She worked together on stage with Charles Wakefield Cadman, a non-Indian composer, and first performed in Chicago as early as 1916 and 1917 at the Ziegfeld Theater. She served as president of the First Daughters from 1930 until approximately 1934.

To the press Blackstone emphasized the role the First Daughters played in promoting Indian social welfare. All of its members were involved in welfare work, which formed the basis of the organization’s purposes. They raised funds to support higher education efforts of Indian women and to send much-needed aid to reservation communities. She stated:

Our greatest piece of work . . . has been the opening of a shop to help the Indian people market their wares directly to the public without a middleman. This not only stimulates them to greater effort but develops the arts to a higher degree of perfection.

The shop that Blackstone established, referred to in the press as an “American Indian emporium,” was located at 540 North Michigan Avenue. The shop purchased goods, such as Navajo rugs from tribal members in reservation communities, to sell to wealthy Chicagoans, such as John L. Kraft. Blackstone observed that the shop served several purposes: it provided economic opportunity for Indian artisans, it encouraged the perpetuation of Indian arts, and by displaying intricately made artwork, it helped combat stereotypes that Indians were lazy and their arts primitive.

Although she used her Indian identity onstage in a way that cemented stereotypical American views of Native women, Blackstone also used her identity and fame to benefit impoverished tribal people. Through her club work, she helped the First Daughters and other women’s clubs provide support for individuals in tribal communities and opportunities for Indian individuals to begin to make a professional or financial life in modern America. Though Blackstone moved away from Chicago in the mid-1930s, the First Daughters continued their work into the 1950s.

**Charles Albert Bender, Baseball Player**

Charles Albert Bender was an Ojibwe Indian, originally from Minnesota. His father Albert was German-American, and his mother Mary of the Mississippi Band of Chippewa in central Minnesota. He attended Carlisle, where he played sports before graduating. He stayed in Pennsylvania after he was hired by famed owner Connie Mack to pitch for the Philadelphia Athletics, with whom he played from 1903 to 1914. Mack referred to Bender, who played most of his hall-of-fame career for Mack’s team, as “the greatest money pitcher the game has ever known.” Bender excelled in an age when racism in baseball was prevalent. While baseball teams did not hire African American players, they did hire American
In the words of his biographer Tom Swift, Bender "was a success according to Pratt's benchmarks," the type of American Indian reformers were attempting to mold. "He had a lovely wife, steady income, and a middle-class row home far away from the reservation."

Even though Bender had a lifelong career in baseball, he regularly experienced discrimination. Publicly known as "Chief," he faced racial taunting throughout his career as a player and coach. His stardom failed to shield him from racial epithets; in fact, it might have intensified them. Bender was no pushover. When fans derisively greeted him with war whoops, he was known to respond by calling them "foreigners." According to Swift, Bender once said, "I do not want my name to be presented to the public as an Indian, but as a pitcher."

Bender was admitted into the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1953. In analyzing whether Bender deserved that honor, Swift comments that his statistical numbers marginally justify it. There are other considerations, though, as Swift also points out. "But if the Hall of Fame is supposed to be a record of the great human achievements in the game's history . . . it's hard to fathom a shrine that excludes Charles Albert Bender." Bender came through the boarding-school system to succeed at the top of his chosen profession. He longed to be recognized on white terms but found what other Indians learned as well—that America's racial hierarchy and attitudes during the Progressive Era did not shield him from discriminatory behavior, even if he followed the dominant society's rules.

Evelyn Frechette, Entertainer
Evelyn "Billie" Frechette was a Menominee Indian from Wisconsin. Chicago was an exciting place for a young Indian woman from a small rural reservation community. Frechette arrived in the city in approximately 1927, as an eighteen year old who simply "wanted to come to Chicago . . . I hadn't been any place in my life . . . [and] Chicago was a big and wonderful place to me." Billie, who took her nickname from her Menominee father, arrived in the city two months pregnant and bereft of any support. She visited two hospitals, including the Salvation Army hospital, before being sent to the Beulah Home for Unwed Mothers on the 2100 block of North Clark Street. The home was rundown and filthy, run by shysters who preyed on its inhabitants. Frechette gave birth to a son, who was taken from her and died within a few months. She did not learn of his death until much later.

Unlike American Indians who came to the city from eastern boarding schools, individuals like Frechette had little formal education and few marketable skills. Without an education or skills it was difficult to find permanent employment. Frechette, a beautiful young woman, found a variety of positions in Chicago, as a saleswoman, nurse,
In this 1913 image, Bender stands ready for action against the White Sox at Comiskey Park. He later coached the Chicago team and even pitched a special inning for them in 1925.
In June 1936, Evelyn Frechette returned to Chicago after the death of John Dillinger. Smiling brightly and fashionably dressed, she told reporters it was “the straight and narrow for her from now on.”
waitress, and “dress maid.” She also participated in the conventional rituals of urban American life, hanging out in ice cream parlors and drinking in speakeasies.

During her off-work hours, Frechette helped the Indian entertainers who performed for non-Indian citizens of Chicago. She joined her sister Patsy and others when the Indian Players sponsored entertainment and events at local churches or civic groups. The Indian Players was a theater group established by the Grand Council Fire in 1929 whose members put on performances throughout the city. The actors were all Indian people, and they produced plays of Indian legends in “full native garb.” Frechette remembered “they put on plays called ‘Little Fire Face’ and ‘The Elm Tree.’ They got all dressed up in their feathers and beads and painted their faces and danced the way we used to on the Indian reservation.” Frechette admitted that she “wasn’t a very good actress” herself. She also helped out cooking wild rice and parched corn and washing dishes. Serving traditional Indian food was apparently part of the Indian Players program, just as it was during festive occasions back home on the reservation.

In 1932, Frechette married Welton “Walter” Spark, a local small-time crook, at Cook County Jail in a double wedding in which a friend of hers married Spark’s partner in crime. It was perhaps at a speakeasy that she met her first husband. Spark eventually broke parole and was sent to the U.S. Penitentiary in Leavenworth, Kansas. After that, his wife got a job as a club’s hat check girl. Soon thereafter, she took up with the notorious gangster John Dillinger.

Dillinger, the most infamous criminal of his time, was dubbed “Public Enemy Number One” by the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Once Billie started spending time with him, she also became a target for federal authorities. She was picked up by federal agents in 1934 at a Chicago tavern, and when Dillinger learned of her arrest he burst out “crying like a baby.” Frechette chronicled her experiences in a True Confessions magazine article, “My Love Life with Dillinger.” The popularity of this magazine cannot be overstated. As a result, after Charles Bender, Frechette was doubtless the best known American Indian in Chicago at the time, and her story gained renewed interest via her portrayal by the French actress Marion Cotillard in the 2009 film Public Enemies.

Frechette served time as Dillinger’s accomplice in a federal prison facility in Milan, Michigan, until 1936. Afterward, she capitalized on her association with Dillinger as part of a traveling carnival-like anticrime show. Despite this, and her feature in True Confessions magazine, she eventually faded from the public’s eye—until Public Enemies brought her back into the national consciousness.

The Indian leaders and individuals discussed here are representative of many others who worked hard to educate the non-Indian world about American Indians both in past and present terms during the Progressive Era. In doing so, they successfully created a relatively safe and comfortable haven for tribal people far from home and laid the basis for a new kind of urban Indian community. Their efforts to define Chicago’s perceptions of American Indians in a positive way proved difficult to sustain in the long term. But Tsianina Blackstone, Carlos Montezuma, Scott Henry Peters, and others still voiced powerful new Indian understandings of their world and provided the organizational basis for future generations to continue their efforts.

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