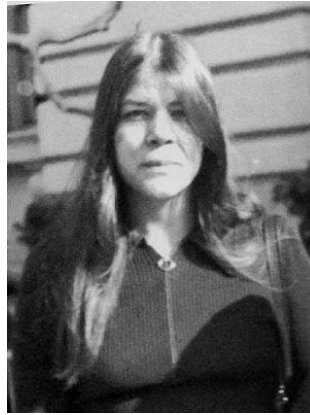




0. Moving From the Reservation - Story Preface

1. A Bit of Indian History

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5. The Legacy of Wilma Mankiller

During the 1950s, a man from the government's Bureau of Indian Affairs came to the Mankiller house with a new plan for where the government thought Indians needed to live. Since living on the reservation had only made them poorer and less educated, the new plan was to help Indians move into the larger white culture of the big cities.

The man showed Wilma's father pictures of happy Indians living in cities across America with good homes and nice clothes. Wilma's father agreed to move the family to San Francisco since Wilma's grandmother already lived in northern California.

When it came time to move in October, 1956, Wilma was eleven years old. Wilma was not happy about moving away from her friends on the reservation and later referred to this move as her own personal Trail of Tears.

When she got to San Francisco, everything seemed so strange and scary. Even the food was different and elevators frightened her. The noise and lights of the city were foreign to Wilma and she described the sirens as "crying of wolves."

Instead of the nice homes and clothes she had seen in the pictures the BIA man showed them, without anyone there to assist them to adjust to the realities of city life, and with no money, the Mankillers were forced to live in a ghetto--now trapped in urban poverty. Now they were poor and isolated from the support of their tribal community.

They now understood that Indians were considered to be second-class citizens. Wilma was so unhappy in Junior High School that she was sent to live for one year with her grandmother on a ranch outside of the city. Her grandmother was a strong independent person and Wilma soon adopted these qualities she admired so much.

One night, after she returned to her family in the city, she began choking badly and could not catch her breath. Her father was scared and quickly called for an ambulance. The emergency operator told him that was not possible because the neighborhood in which they lived was considered too risky to drive in at night.

Wilma recovered, but always remembered that her neighborhood was too dangerous for "normal" people.

In 1963, Wilma graduated from high school, and she met and married Hugo Olaya and had two daughters. At first, she was happy to be a wife, mother and homemaker, but before long, she began to wonder if there could be more to her life than just running a household. She often thought about the plight of the Cherokees but could not envision how she could help them.

Then, in 1969, an event happened which gave Wilma a new direction in life.

Several Native Americans landed on the island of Alcatraz and claimed the land in the name of "Indians of all Tribes." The island had been the site of an old federal prison but now was abandoned with decaying buildings and not much else.

There was an existing old law, from 1868, which stated that Native Americans could file for a home on any federal property that wasn't being used. The group of activists didn't really intend to live on Alcatraz--they just wanted to shine a light on the miserable living conditions endured by most American tribal people.

Wilma understood what the occupation of the island was really about. She often made trips to Alcatraz during the nineteen months the Indians occupied it. She realized she truly wanted to participate in making life better for her people.

In 1971, her father died and she and her family traveled back to the Oklahoma reservation to bury him. It had been fourteen years since she had left the reservation, but little had changed there. She was even more determined to change the conditions in Oklahoma.

When she returned to San Francisco, she enrolled in college and bought herself a car. Her husband did not want her to have a life outside of their family and home. They grew apart and divorced in 1974.

With the help of friends, she moved back to Oklahoma to stay. She had no job, and there were very few job opportunities on the reservation. There was only run-down shacks to live in there. But she was back and had two daughters with her and she found the strength to survive.

She asked at the BIA office if they had a job for her. They told her she didn't have the skills required to work there. She replied:

I want to work! Whatever you have, let me try it!

Just as she was beginning to work at the BIA, she was driving to work one morning. When she came to the top of a hill, a car coming from the opposite direction pulled out to pass. It was a head-on collision that left Wilma badly disfigured. The woman driving the other car was one of her oldest and dearest friends, and she was killed in the accident.

But the bad news continued-- Wilma was diagnosed with a form of muscular dystrophy.

But Wilma did not give up, especially since she had stared death in the eye and now had a chance for a new life. When she was able to return to work, she approached it with a passion.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/Moving-From-the-Reservation-Wilma-Mankiller-Cherokee-Chief>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/Moving-From-the-Reservation-Wilma-Mankiller-Cherokee-Chief>

Questions 2 Ponder

How Does Moving to a Strange Place Impact Us?

Wilma Mankiller was a civil-rights leader. She did many "firsts" throughout her life. When she was eleven years old, Wilma's family moved to a strange, new place.

Has your family ever moved to a new town? How did you cope with all the changes? Was it hard to make new friends? How did you make things work?

If you've never had to move to a new place, how do you think you would manage? How would you cope with different surroundings if you were in Wilma's place?

Media Stream



Wilma Mankiller

Speak Cherokee

View this asset at: <http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Wilma-Mankiller0>