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# This Is Indian Country

By Nicolas G. Rosenthal



The Indian Revival Center in Bell Gardens, circa 1962, was once the largest Native American church in Los Angeles.

*For most of the past century, a migration has been taking place within the United States: Native Americans have been moving from tribal and rural lands to America's cities. But Native Americans have not abandoned reservations for urban life. Instead, they've built a network that joins reservations, rural lands, suburban communities and urban centers, with Los Angeles as the "urban Indian capital of the United States."*

Los Angeles is Indian Country. Somewhere around 250,000 people of American Indian descent live in Los Angeles County today. This includes California Indian peoples, like the Gabriellino/Tongva, who are the original inhabitants of the Los Angeles Basin, as well as American Indians from hundreds of tribes with homelands across the United States. In fact, Los Angeles is second only to the Navajo Nation in having the largest Native American population in the country. It's because of the city's importance to Native peoples that Los Angeles is known throughout the rest of Indian Country as the "urban Indian capital of the United States."

Just like any capital, this Los Angeles exists in dynamic relationship with other places. Indian Country — a term that once was applied to a few parts of the United States with heavy

concentrations of Native Americans — now comprises cities, towns, rural areas and Indian reservations, from the tip of northern Maine to the California-Mexico border. This shift has occurred in dramatic fashion over the past 100 years, as many Native peoples have left reservations and adapted to U.S. society. Like other migrants, they've maintained connections back home even as they've established new communities. Today, from the vantage point of Los Angeles, we can see an Indian Country that spreads out before us, its many points linked together by the movements of Native peoples traveling its well-worn paths.

The end of the 19th century was a time of crisis for Native Americans. Hundreds of years of European and American colonialism had resulted in massive losses that extended to Native American lives, lands, societies and cultures. As late as the 1870s, the United States was still in the process of conquering the American West, propelled by Manifest Destiny. A decade later, however, United States Indian policy had shifted to focus on the confinement of American Indians to reservations and the destruction of their cultures. Officials hoped to “Americanize” Native Americans or, in other words, to wipe away any vestiges of Native American life as Native peoples were assimilated into American society.

Confronted with these processes, Native peoples worked to rebuild their lives and communities, often by joining in the major movements of American culture and society. Urbanization and industrialization were changing the way of life for all Americans, as rural migrants and immigrants filled the country's burgeoning cities. Native Americans were part of this, too, as they moved to rapidly developing farmlands, towns and urban areas of the United States.

## **The Lure of Los Angeles**

Los Angeles, an expanding metropolitan region, was a particularly enticing destination for Native American migrants. From reservations throughout Southern California, Indians traveled to work among the orchards, farms and ranches of the San Fernando Valley, Inland Empire and Orange County. Native people labored in L.A. mills and factories, as construction workers and housekeepers, settling into multiethnic neighborhoods. Others, such as Richard Davis Thunderbird, a Cheyenne Indian born in 1866, came to the city because it was the center of the entertainment industry. Thunderbird traveled with Wild West shows, appeared in vaudeville, led a troupe of Cheyenne dancers, lectured on Indian history, wrote a manuscript on Cheyenne religion, owned a house in Pasadena, and worked as an actor and technical advisor in Hollywood until his death in 1946, when he was buried in Forest Lawn Memorial Park, in Glendale.

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During World War II, American Indians entered the armed forces and took jobs in the defense industry in Los Angeles and other cities that had military installations, airplane factories and shipyards. They often stayed after the war. Purcell Rainwater, a Sioux Indian, recalled his daughter returning home to the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota after serving in the U.S. military: “She went, came back and stayed for, I don't know, a week or two. Then she said,

‘Dad, there’s nothing around for me.’ ” He told her that he knew it was difficult for her there. So he helped her get ready to move to Los Angeles.

Seeing these patterns, the federal government began an urban relocation program in 1948 and expanded it under the Indian Relocation Act of 1956 to provide traveling expenses, startup funds and vocational school tuition for American Indians to move to cities. More than 30,000 of the 155,000 relocation participants chose Los Angeles, including Dennis Tafoya.

Tafoya was 5 years old in 1955 when he arrived with his family from Santa Clara Pueblo in New Mexico so his father, a World War II veteran, could work in the aerospace industry. Tafoya grew up in Hermosa Beach with his brothers and sisters, going to public schools and university, while participating in a multi-tribal American Indian community that was laying down roots throughout the Los Angeles area. Weeknights, his parents were busy volunteering for groups that served the needs of this community, such as the Los Angeles Indian Center, the American Indian Free Clinic or the American Indian Athletic Association, which sponsored basketball, softball and bowling leagues. The weekends found the Tafoyas working in the Indian Village at Disneyland or at an Indian powwow, where Dennis remembered a “melting pot of Indian people” gathering to socialize and teach each other tribal dances. In effect, they were helping to renew and reinvent their identities as American Indian people in the urban context, as if to say, “The city, too, is Indian Country.”

Even as they became urban Indians, Native Americans maintained connections to tribal homelands, through summer visits, intermarriage with members of other tribes and careers that required travel between reservations and cities. Jim Looking Glass, an Apache-Comanche man from Oklahoma, exemplified the type of life that American Indians were living in this new Indian Country. Looking Glass served in Vietnam as a U.S. marine and afterward attended California State University, Long Beach. He then moved between Oklahoma and Los Angeles, working at times for the Apache and Kiowa tribes, Oklahomans for Indian Opportunity, the Los Angeles Urban Indian Development Association and the Orange County Indian Center. Tribes also began to think creatively about how to reach all of their members, since so many had come to spend much of their lives in cities. Today, the Cherokee Nation supports the group Tsa-La-Gi LA, “The Official Cherokee Nation Satellite Community of Los Angeles,” for the purpose of connecting to tribal members, and candidates for tribal office regularly make campaign visits to Los Angeles.

Beginning in the 1990s, the advent of gaming on American Indian reservations further blurred boundaries between cities and reservations. Some tribe members with college degrees and urban employment experiences moved back to reservations to work on everything from running casinos and hotels to establishing education and social service programs. Gaming tribes in California also took advantage of their wealth and influence to play a more active role in the life of cities by contributing billions of dollars to local, state and national political campaigns; sponsoring events and annual festivals; donating to universities; and advertising on television and billboards. Indeed, there now is a certain irony in attending a baseball game at Petco Park, the home of the San Diego Padres, a team that uses a caricature of Spanish colonialism as its mascot, and seeing an advertisement for the casino run by the Barona Band of Mission Indians. These are the realities of today’s Indian Country.

## Native American Angelenos

The San Manuel Band of Mission Indians maintains a reservation with several tribal enterprises in San Bernardino County and is a major presence in the Inland Empire, serving as one of the area's largest employers and philanthropic donors. Several years ago, the tribe began producing television commercials, including some that depicted a Southern California history in which American Indian people have been a constant presence and contributor even while the region changed dramatically over the past two-and-a-half centuries. Indeed, Southern California has long had tribes like the San Manuel living alongside other California peoples such as the Gabrielino/Tongva.

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More recently, the San Manuel have been joined by peoples from hundreds of different tribal communities who have migrated from their homelands, from the recently arrived to those whose families have lived here or moved about the country for generations. These Native American Angelenos can be found attending one of the area's many intertribal powwows, seeking services at organizations established to meet their needs like United American Indian Involvement Inc. and Southern California Indian Center, and in the classrooms of universities, some of which offer American Indian Studies programs. They can also be seen shopping in stores, eating in restaurants, driving on freeways, riding city buses, working in office buildings and relaxing at the beach alongside city residents of every imaginable background. Today, Los Angeles is Indian Country. Some would say that it has always been so.

*Nicolas G. Rosenthal is associate professor of history in the Bellarmine College of Liberal Arts. His expertise is in American Indian history, environmental history, Los Angeles and California history, the history of the American West, and 20th century U.S. history. Rosenthal is the author of "Reimagining Indian Country: Native American Migration and Identity in Twentieth-Century Los Angeles." He now is working on a history of American Indian artists and sculptors and their place in U.S. culture and society.*

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