

# Behind our shared forgetting

## Learning the stories of displaced peoples

Rich H. Meyer

### South Africa

It's 1981. Brenda and I are driving through South Africa, from Lesotho to Botswana. We stop at a roadside farm stand in the Orange Free State, fresh fruit and beef jerky for sale.

"How do you like our country?"

It's a loaded question. We've heard it before. It often follows right after, "Are you American?"

We acknowledge that he pegged our accent, and I give a vague response: "It's a beautiful land—and there are problems." The South African government has been trying to establish "homelands" for blacks, with forced removals of black communities from wide swaths of the country. Nelson Mandela is in prison, the anti-apartheid movement is gaining traction in the United States, and the Boer farmer would probably like to be able to look into the future. Then he says, "You Americans did it right—just a few small reservations left." (Did he say, "killed them off"? I can't remember.)

We "did it right"? He's referring to our<sup>1</sup> successful effort to get rid of the indigenous people and take their land. I'm from Indiana, a state that, in spite of the name, has no Indian reservations.<sup>2</sup> Indians are less than .5 percent of the population of Indiana and hold no tribal trust land,<sup>3</sup> so I guess if that was the goal, then he's correct. His government is trying to

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1 As a descendant of Swiss and Alsatian immigrants to North America, I identify as part of the dominant culture built through the displacement of Native Americans by European settlers.

2 I use varied vocabulary—Indians, Native Americans, members of First Nations—because I have heard the people I am identifying ask for all of these in different contexts. It is my assumption that preferred terminology will vary from place to place and over time, as it has in the past. I attempt to allow individuals and groups to name themselves, and if the labels I have used offend, I apologize.

3 This changed in 2016 when the Bureau of Indian Affairs accepted 166 acres owned by the Pokagon Band of Potawatomi Indians near South Bend in trust.

do the same, but internal and international opposition is frustrating their efforts.

I thought about similarities and differences between Indiana and South Africa. What are the essential components of conquest, and which are “optional”? Colonization including immigration? Check. Ethnic cleansing? Check. Genocide? I think that term fits the European conquest of North America more than of southern Africa. From an estimated indigenous population of ten million in 1492 to about a quarter of a million in 1890, we did a pretty effective job of extermination. I don’t know how much Lord Amherst’s smallpox-infected blankets contributed, but clearly the dispossession and replacement of the indigenous population had been far more successful in the United States than in South Africa.

## Indiana

How did we do it? I knew in generalities but not in any detail. And why didn’t I know this history? The answer to that has two related parts: because I wasn’t taught, and because it wasn’t important. It wasn’t important to my teachers; it wasn’t important to my community. Of course, there were Indians here before European settlement—homes, farms, villages—but then what happened? I knew that much of the land was ceded in treaties, but that doesn’t really explain disappearance. I’ve heard of the Trail of Tears, the forced removal of the Cherokee, from Georgia. What about Indiana? When I returned to Indiana in 1987, I decided to do some research.

Having a general idea might be the subject matter of sociology, history or political science. I was fuzzy even on that. Not that I was completely ignorant. As a child I had a small book that had been given to my mother when she was a child: *Indians of America*, copyright 1935.<sup>4</sup> I believe it was that book that first caused me to wonder what happened to the Indians who were described there. Later I had a junior high history teacher who offered me some independent study, including sobering material on poverty and life expectancy of Native Americans. I was in high school and an avid reader of *Newsweek* during the siege of Wounded Knee, when President Nixon sent tanks and snipers to put down the protest occupation by the American Indian Movement of the church. I was aware of the general outlines of some parts of the history, but I don’t know that I could have told you what tribe had lived around Goshen before colonization.

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4 Lillian Davids Fazzini, *Indians of America* (Racine, WI: Whitman Publishing, 1935).

Now I wanted to know in detail, about people in a place; I wanted to know stories. What stories are told, by whom, about my place? In a speech at the opening of an ice park, Elkhart Mayor Dave Miller said, “Just 200 years ago on this very site, there lived small tribes of Indians.” He said they made fires and lived in teepees. “Then the missionaries

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came, and the builders came, and the Indians moved on. It’s amazing what God allows us to do with the land he gives us.”<sup>5</sup> Apart from getting the housing wrong, this is pretty vague on what happened. In the Dr. Seuss book, if you want to know how the Lorax “got lifted and taken away,” you have to pay for the secret.<sup>6</sup>

I began with a few maps showing traditional lands of Indian tribes and land cessions by date. Northern Indiana/Illinois was ceded through a series of treaties between the United States and bands of Potawatomi Indians, from about 1816 through 1836. Before that, the Potawatomi were among the signatories of the 1795 Treaty of Greenville (Ohio), where the United States committed to preventing further westward expansion of European settlement, and the tribes ceded what is now Ohio. By that treaty, settlers moving into what is now Indiana were to be treated as outlaws. The United States was to remove them, and the Indians were free to attack them.

The underlying contradiction was that the Treaty of Greenville ended a period of skirmishes along the border, resulting in a sense on the part of settlers that it had become safer to move west. I don’t know whether any of the representatives of the United States at Greenville thought it possible or ever intended to stop westward expansion at the Ohio line, but they didn’t. The phenomenal wave of migration that overwhelmed the Potawatomi and Miami brought the settler population of what is now Indiana from an estimated 6,550 in 1800 to 344,508 in 1830.<sup>7</sup>

5 Adam Nussbaum, “Elkhart Water & Ice Park opens,” *Goshen News*, December 9, 2007, A1 (cont. on A2).

6 Dr. Seuss, *The Lorax* (New York: Random House, 1971).

7 Esarey, Logan, *A History of Indiana from Its Exploration to 1850* (2 vols. 1915), I, 175, 315. Cited (footnote, p. 17) in *Potawatomi Trail of Death*, Shirley Willard and Susan Campbell, 2003 Fulton County Historical Society, Rochester, Indiana.

That fifty-fold increase in one generation defines the dispossession of the Potawatomi and Miami.

In the face of this tidal wave of immigrants, many Indians concluded that continuing in their traditional way of life was impossible. Some moved west. Wonongaseah (“Five Medals”) led a village on the Elkhart River, just south of Goshen. He traveled to Philadelphia, then the capital of the United States, and when he returned, he advised no further resistance but rather a shift to agriculture, with the goal of remaining among the settler farming communities. Other leaders continued to resist. A coalition that included representatives of at least fourteen tribes was gathered by Tecumseh and The Prophet near Lafayette, Indiana. They were defeated by US troops in 1811. The Chicago area (Fort Dearborn) was then ceded in 1816. Indiana became a state in 1816, at a time when most of the land had not yet been ceded. (I’m still not sure how it works to add territory to your nation while it still belongs to another nation.) The cession

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of land by treaty was perhaps a detail to neaten things up after the fact. In 1821, in a treaty signed in Chicago, the land on which Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary (AMBS) now stands was ceded.

In 1829 Andrew Jackson was elected President on a platform of “Indian Removal.” Following his election, the Indian Removal Act was passed, requiring all Indians to move west of the Mississippi River. There were many removals of


Potawatomi over the next few years, some “voluntary” and some conducted by federal agents. In the series of treaties that followed, the remaining Potawatomi were concentrated into smaller and smaller reserves. In the 1832 Treaty of Tippecanoe, four chiefs were reduced to twenty-two square miles in what is now Marshall County. On this reserve the Potawatomi who were still hoping to stay made their homes.

In 1836 in the Treaty of Yellow River, the other three chiefs agreed to cede their land and to move west within two years. The fourth chief, Menominee, refused. One factor may have been that the negotiators for the United States brought whiskey to the treaty, but Menominee, who

had been ordained as a Baptist minister, was a teetotaler.<sup>8</sup> US courts decided that three out of four was good enough. In an 1837 affirmation by a number of Potawatomi chiefs of the decision to move west, Menominee again refused to sign.

## The Trail of Death

On August 30, 1838, Menominee and others were asked to come to a meeting at the chapel in their village. It was a trap: they were held at gunpoint by a militia raised from South Bend, Logansport, and LaPorte. Over the next few days, the US troops rounded up all the Potawatomi they could find from as far away as Shipshewana. Some Potawatomi fled north to Michigan, where deportation was not threatened. (The governor of Indiana was eager to enforce removals. Most of the Potawatomi land



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in Michigan had been converted from tribal holdings to private property held by title and was therefore available for purchase by settlers. Michigan has fifteen Indian reservations today.)

On September 4 the troops began driving about eight hundred Potawatomi on a forced march. Menominee and a few other leaders who still refused to cooperate were placed in cages on wagons. Details of this emigration are recorded in a journal kept by one of the soldiers,

in letters written by Fr. Benjamin Petit, and in stories handed down through the descendants of the Potawatomi who were on the removal. Perhaps sixty Potawatomi died on the Trail of Death, most of them children or the elderly.

The end of the Trail of Death was in early November, when the US troops left the survivors of this Great Lakes woodland tribe on the treeless plains of eastern Kansas and hurried home. The Potawatomi were left without the promised homes or land; the area where they were left had earlier been promised to the Osage. The Potawatomi moved south twenty-five miles to join members of the tribe who had emigrated earlier and found refuge at a Catholic mission on Sugar Creek.

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<sup>8</sup> By this time, following the closure of the Baptist mission near Niles, Menominee and his band had converted to Catholicism.

Because the US government frequently changed its policies for relating to Indian tribes, and because often the policies broke tribes up into smaller bands, Potawatomi today are organized in at least nine separate bands or nations. Descendants of the Potawatomi who lived in Elkhart County might be found among the Pokagon, as some fled north in the era of removals. The descendants of the survivors of the Trail of Death might be in the Prairie Band Potawatomi Nation, located in Kansas, or in the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, based in Oklahoma.

So that is how we did it. A hundred and fifty years later, Brenda and I bought thirty-five acres of farmland in Elkhart County. The title abstract for our farm begins with a “Certificate of Entry” from a US Government land auction in Fort Wayne in 1833. This land was ceded in a treaty signed at Carey Mission (near present-day Niles, Michigan) in 1828, so it took a few years to survey the land for sale.

### **Finding the stories**

Then I saw a photo in the newspaper of a man holding a pinch of tobacco up toward a brown and white sign along a highway. The sign read, “Potawatomi Trail of Death—Regional Historic Trail—1838 Indiana to Kansas.” The caption identified the man as George Godfrey of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation and made reference to a Trail of Courage Festival that was going to take place near Plymouth, Indiana. With a few phone calls, I was in touch with George and with Shirley Willard, president of the Fulton County Historical Society. Now the stories started coming.

Stories begin wherever the storyteller decides to begin. I started to notice how accounts of Amish-Mennonite communities in the *Mennonite Historical Bulletin* often began with the first Amish-Mennonite settler. This was often about a decade after the treaty ceding the land, but that close proximity in time was hidden because there was silence about everything before the Amish-Mennonite settlement. In 1998 I suggested to the editor that articles about the beginning of Amish-Mennonite settlements should include a short introductory paragraph that would give the reader just this much: Whose land was this before colonization, how did they lose it, and where are their descendants today?

The editor of the *Mennonite Historical Bulletin*, John Sharp, replied that he supported this but that this would be an area of research new to many of their writers, requiring the use of unfamiliar sources. (Apparently I was not the only person for whom this story had not been part of my education, had not been important to my community or my teachers.)

He asked whether I would write an instructional article on how someone could learn the answers to these three questions for their home or the area they were studying. My article was published in the July 1999 *Mennonite Historical Bulletin*.<sup>9</sup>

## **Palestine**

By this time I had begun working with Christian Peacemaker Teams, and my first assignments were in the southern West Bank. There I was immediately partnered with Israeli and Palestinian peacemakers who were trying to protect the homes of Palestinians from demolition by the Israeli government. Many of the Palestinian families had land records from the Ottoman era. These home demolitions were part of an Israeli government policy attempting to bring the facts on the ground into line with a colonial narrative which begins like this: “A land of no people for a people with no land.”<sup>10</sup>

Colonization including immigration? Check. Ethnic cleansing? Check. I visited some newly built concentration towns<sup>11</sup> where Bedouin were being settled as their fields and grazing lands in the Negev were being taken from them. Rabbi Jeremy Milgrom, one of the founders of Rabbis for Human Rights, once told me in personal conversation, “We think of the Bedouin as you might think of crows in a field. If you wave your hand, they will fly away, and you don’t have to think about where they will land—they are just gone from your field and your sight.” The dispossession of the Bedouin is continuing today.

## **Covenant nations**

My son who lived on Pine Ridge said, “The Indian Wars aren’t over; we are still taking their land today.” Ask any Lakota about the theft of the Black Hills or the Bureau of Indian Affairs management of grazing leases to ranchers, or the transfer of land taken from the Lakota by the United States to the state of South Dakota. I think South Africa is different; after elections, a huge disparity in wealth is one legacy of colonization, and

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9 Rich H. Meyer, “Why Don’t We Tell the Beginning of the Story?,” *Mennonite Historical Bulletin* 55, no. 3 (July 1999): 1–8.

10 The population of Palestine was about half a million (94 percent Arab) when Theodore Hertzl and Israel Zangwell introduced this phrase at the First Zionist Congress in 1847.

11 “Concentration towns” is the description of veteran Israeli peace activist Amos Gvirtz.

building a multi-ethnic democracy is a challenge, but the colonial enterprise is now explained in museums for people too young to remember it.

This is not just a story of Indiana, not just a story of South Africa, not just a story of Israel/Palestine. It is a consistent pattern when Europeans move into the lands of non-Europeans. Legal structures around land tenure that disregard indigenous people. Unwilling to share, willing to kill, armed with gunpowder—how deeply engrained in our culture is this sense of entitlement? Where does this hubris come from? Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz makes a category for these “covenant nations,” meaning that the conqueror believes that they have a covenant with God that includes a right to this land that they are taking.<sup>12</sup>

### Forgetting, remembering

French historian Ernest Renan wrote that a nation is a community formed of shared remembering and shared forgetting.<sup>13</sup> The stories of the indigenous people of this place and of our handling of relationships with them

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were part of the shared forgetting of my community. My teachers left this out in order to form a more perfect Union—that is, to create in our defective memories a nation more perfect than the reality of this nation of the United States of America. Mayor Dave Miller skipped over it when dedicating the ice skating park. South Dakota Governor William Janklow affirmed this shared forgetting when he dismissed the Fort Laramie

Treaty of 1868 on the grounds that all of the people who signed it are now deceased.<sup>14</sup> Golda Meir chose it when she said, “There were no such thing as Palestinians.”<sup>15</sup>

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12 Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon, 2014).

13 Ernest Renan, “Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?,” lecture given at the Sorbonne, March 11, 1882.

14 Reported via email by sources quoting Lakota youth who met with Gov. Janklow on March 22, 1999.

15 As quoted in *Sunday Times*, June 15, 1969, and *The Washington Post*, June 16, 1969.



am grateful for the biennial AMBS class that follows the Trail of Death. I am encouraged by others who are also telling these stories: George Schricker, who has been singing the song of Menominee for thirty years; Shirley Willard and other county historians along the Trail of Death; Adam Friesen, whose fourth-grade class at Bethany Christian Schools performed his play about Menominee and the Trail of Death; and especially George Godfrey, Sister Virginia Pearl, and other Potawatomi who have continued to remember and teach these stories that can change our forgetful nation. Dr. Seuss says that knowing the story matters because the next chapter is up to the hearers: “UNLESS someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It’s not.”<sup>16</sup>

My interest is growing in the nonverbal story-telling of Citizen Potawatomi Nation photographer Sharon Hoogstraten whose large canvases of Potawatomi in regalia now greet you in the halls of AMBS. I’m interested in learning from the Pokagon cooks who are recovering their food sovereignty and are willing to share those stories with us. When Skylar Alsup brought Three Sisters Soup (corn, beans, and squash) to a reception at AMBS on June 3, 2019, he said, “Thank you for listening. It feels like for a long time we’ve been trying to say something, and no one was hearing us.”

### **About the author**

Rich H. Meyer lives on Potawatomi land along the Elkhart River, five miles upstream from the site of Wonongaseah’s village. He has been the navigator for a number of groups retracing the Trail of Death from Indiana to Kansas. His work history includes plumbing and auto mechanics, years with Mennonite Central Committee, Christian Peacemaker Teams, and now Elkhart County Clubhouse, an intentional work community for adults with mental illnesses.

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<sup>16</sup> Dr. Seuss, *The Lorax*.