

## **Gertrude “Zitkala Sha” Simmons Bonnin. (1876-1938)**

Gertrude Simmons Bonnin, Zitkala Sha (Red Bird), was a talented and educated Native American woman who struggled and triumphed in a time when severe prejudice prevailed toward Native American culture and women. Her talents and contributions in the worlds of literature, music, and politics challenge long-standing beliefs about Native Americans.

Bonnin aimed at creating understanding between the dominant white and Native American cultures. As a Metis woman of mixed white and Native American ancestry, she embodied the need for the two cultures to live cooperatively within the same body of land. Her works criticized dogma, and her life as a Native American woman was dedicated against the evils of oppression.

Bonnin was born on February 22, 1876, on the Pine Ridge Yankton Reservation in South Dakota. Her father was a white man named Felker, about whom little is known. Her mother was Ellen Tate Iyohinwin (She Reaches for the Wind) Simmons, a full-blooded Sioux. Bonnin was Simmons’ third child.

At eight years of age, Bonnin decided to leave her mother and the reservation to attend White's Manual Labor Institute in Wabash, Indiana. This was a school funded by the Quakers. After four years she returned home, but then enrolled, against her mother’s wishes, at the Santee Normal Training School. She chose this school because it was close to her mother. In 1895, she decided to move on and accepted entrance and scholarships to Earlham College in Indiana.



Though most noted for her literary and political genius, Bonnin was an accomplished violinist and even won a scholarship to study at the Boston Conservatory of Music. In 1913, she and classical music composer William Hanson wrote an opera called Sun Dance. The creation was appreciated by a few Native Americans, but since 1937 has gone unnoticed. Neither before nor since has there been an opera written by a Native American. Music was Bonnin’s real love, yet she felt it more important to fight for the rights of her people through literature and politics.

After her studies at the Boston Conservatory, Bonnin accepted a teaching position at the Carlisle Indian School. Her stay at Carlisle Indian School lasted two years.

As a writer, she adopted the pen name "Zitkala Sha" and in 1900 began publishing articles criticizing the Carlisle Indian School. She resented the degradation students underwent, from forced Christianity to severe punishment for speaking in native languages. She was criticized for this because many felt she showed no gratitude for the kindness and support that white people had given her in her education.

Gertrude married Captain Raymond Bonnin. He was a mixed blood Nakota living on the reservation and working for the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Unfortunately, the marriage did indeed prove detrimental to her career as she was forced to follow her husband's career as they moved from reservation to reservation. The Bonnins had one son named Ohiya (Winner).

On a reservation in Utah the Bonnins became part of the Society of American Indians, of which she was elected secretary in 1916. The Bonnins moved to Washington, D.C., where Gertrude continued her work with the Society and began editing the *American Indian Magazine*.

A strong political voice for Native Americans, Bonnin wrote *Oklahoma's Poor Rich Indians: An Orgy of Graft, Exploitation of the Five Civilized Tribes, Legalized Robbery*. This work, published in 1924, with two white co-authors, exposed the robberies and murders in Oklahoma of Native American people and led to the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, reestablishing a trust for Indian lands. Bonnin was also pivotal in gaining the rights of citizenship and the vote for Native Americans. She did this by seeking unity between all tribes in a pan-Indian political power. Thus began the National Counsel of American Indians, in 1926.

Bonnin died in 1938, and is buried in Arlington National Cemetery.

Source:

Arlington National Cemetery: <http://www.arlingtoncemetery.net/gsbonnin.htm>



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