

Exiles on Main Street: Searching for the Ghosts of Bunker Hill's Native American Past

Resuscitated 1961 documentary recalls stark lives of L.A.'s urban Indians

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published: August 14, 2008



Once upon a time in Los Angeles: The Exiles' non-pro actors take to the streets



Yvonne Walker (nee Williams), circa 1961



Kent Mackenzie directs on the set



Eddie Sunrise sings on Hill X

Orly Olivier



It's a Sunday night in downtown Los Angeles and my friend, Kumeyaay Indian filmmaker Cedar Sherbert, hits me with an interesting question.

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(Click to enlarge)

Yvonne Walker (nee Williams), circa 1961

(Click to enlarge)

Kent Mackenzie directs on the set

“Close your eyes and try to picture an Indian,” he says. “What do you see?”

We're walking at a steady clip toward the dive bars of Third and Main streets, and the question catches me off guard. I was in the midst of visualizing a beer. Cedar, thankfully, doesn't give me time to respond.

“I think most people would say they see a man, probably wearing feathers, maybe even on horseback in the plains,” he says. “Definitely not a woman, or an urban Indian in jeans. Popular conceptions of Indian-ness are tied to this strange, all-male universe — someone's romantic idea of the past.”

Times, of course, have changed. Nearly two-thirds of all American Indians now live in urban areas, up from 8 percent in 1940. While American Indians have long made their presence felt in cities like Seattle and San Francisco, Los Angeles is Native America's

Back from exile: Walker today, in her Bellflower apartment

Orly Olivier



Without a trace: The now mostly Mexican Bunker Hill haunt

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unheralded urban hub. More than 150,000 people in L.A. County identify themselves as American Indian — the largest population of urban Indians in the U.S. — and that doesn't even include the local Tongva and Gabrieleno tribes, which are currently vying for federal recognition.

While some Native people came here independently, and others are undoubtedly descendants of the Sherman Indian High School in Riverside (which for more than 70 years removed Indian children from reservations and forcibly assimilated them into white American culture), many were part of a two-decade, government-sponsored Indian exodus from reservations to urban areas.

In 1952, the federal government, through its Bureau of Indian Affairs, implemented the Urban Indian Relocation Program, a voluntary plan that paid rural Indians to leave the reservation and start new lives in the city. Los Angeles was one of seven BIA-proscribed destination points, and arguably the most popular. As tens of thousands of Indians made their way here, the old, Victorian boarding houses of Bunker Hill became their waystations.

The bars of Third and Main were their stomping grounds.

When Bunker Hill was bulldozed in the late '60s to make way for skyscrapers, its Indian enclave scattered, never to reform in any concrete fashion. Whenever Cedar and I go downtown, he has the habit of pointing to the stretch of buildings at Third and Main and reminding me that "those used to be Indian bars." He always says "used to," but neither of us has ever actually been inside.

So we decide to finally take a look.

Approaching the intersection, we suddenly spot dozens of people crowding around an unassuming white truck parked on the northeast corner. The gathering looks like a block party — which, these days, would be unusual for this part of town. This particular corner generally has more in common with Skid Row to the east than it does with the livelier, gentrified neighborhoods to the south and west.

Fifty years ago, though, this area would have been packed with American Indians. Some would have been savvy city kids looking to drink, dance and generally raise hell. Others would have been fresh from the sticks of Oklahoma or Arizona, just looking for a familiar face.

Tonight, a few small dive bars, interspersed with some shuttered mom-and-pop businesses, are the only signs of life in these bleak environs. Signs hanging from a chainlink fence next to the white truck indicate the area won't stay this way for long. The arrival of new "mixed-use commercial and residential space" — which most likely means

a new Starbucks, a Jamba Juice and several million dollars' worth of luxury condos — appears imminent. But for now, the block maintains its rough edge, as evidenced by this apparent street party, which, upon closer inspection, turns out to be a crew of Skid Row homeless scoring hot meals from a mobile mission.

Shortly before we hit Third Street, Cedar's friend Yolanda Cruz, a Native filmmaker originally from Mexico, joins our fact-finding expedition — even though she'd rather be at the more fashionable Pete's up the block.

“This is kind of depressing,” she jokes. “Why did the center of Indian activity have to be a bar? Why not a park or a bowling alley or something?”

We reach our destination and step inside the Five Stars Bar, where the older, mostly Mexican clientele sit quietly on barstools sipping Tecate. Despite its faded façade, the interior of the place is striking — high ceilings, dark tasteful trim and subtle lighting. An old-time, polished brass bar in the back of the room complements a newer marble one up front. No Indians in sight. No traces of their ever having been here.

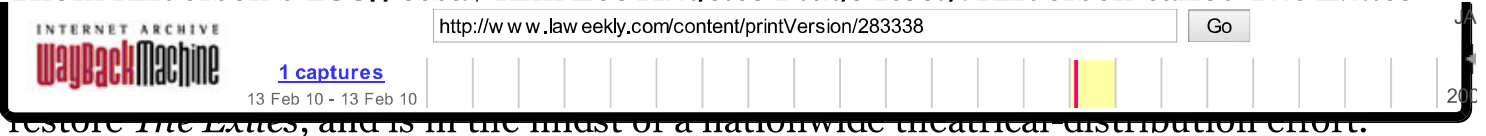
We all kind of expected as much. Still, the question remains: “Where did they all go?”

Sitting in the bedroom of her comfortable Bellflower apartment, purple curtains drawn, muted light shining down on her purple bedspread, Yvonne Walker smiles as she watches herself on TV.

“I wish I was that young again,” she laughs.

It's been nearly 50 years since Walker starred in Kent Mackenzie's 1961 film *The Exiles* — to this day, arguably the only film ever made about urban Indians. (See sidebar review.)

Buried for years in the USC archives, the film was given new life after being featured in Thom Andersen's 2003 essay film *Los Angeles Plays Itself*. Andersen called *The Exiles*



Shot during the heyday of the Third and Main scene and the Indian exodus to Bunker Hill, Mackenzie's film follows 12 hours in the lives of Walker, her Hualapai husband, Homer, and their Mexican friend Tommy as they struggle to find identity amid the hedonistic chaos of downtown Los Angeles.

Fusing lightly directed improvisational scenes with vérité documentary voice-over, *The Exiles* captures an otherwise unexplored chapter in Los Angeles' history, and a chapter in Walker's life that she thought was long hidden.

“I've only even seen the movie one time,” she says. “I lost touch with all these people years ago.”

(Click to enlarge)

Eddie Sunrise sings on Hill X

Orly Olivier

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Back from exile: Walker today, in her Bellflower apartment

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Without a trace: The now mostly Mexican Bunker Hill haunt


Back then, Walker was known as Yvonne Williams. An Apache born on the San Carlos reservation in Arizona in 1938, she traveled a hard road to get to Los Angeles, and things didn't get any smoother when she eventually arrived.

At 5 years of age, Walker became a de facto orphan when her mother died and her father refused to take responsibility for her. "He said he couldn't look after a girl," says Walker skeptically. "I never did buy that."

Walker was put in the care of her aunt, who paid to send her to Catholic boarding school. As she got older, Walker stopped spending her summers on the reservation and instead headed to Los Angeles, where she'd work and save money for the school year.

"I first came to Los Angeles when I was 14," she says. "I cleaned houses for rich people."

When Walker was 16, her aunt passed away. Without her guardian, she was alone and broke and couldn't afford to keep going to school. She was on her own.



over. People were dirt poor. I saw enough of what life was like there.

So, Walker again came to Los Angeles, supporting herself by cleaning houses. Over time, one of her bosses, a wealthy real estate agent, took an interest in her. The two women would often have long talks together about life and love. "I used to tell her that I wanted a little baby, but I didn't want a husband," Walker laughs. "That got her mad. She was always trying to tell me that I needed a husband."

The real estate agent was taken with Walker, and told her she wanted to adopt her. But Walker's father refused to sign the papers.

"I sometimes wished she would have been able to adopt me," Walker says. "My life probably would have been a whole lot easier than it was."

Instead, Walker scraped by, doing what she could to earn a living. She never really drank, but nonetheless started hanging out in the Main Street bars when she turned 18. She met her first husband, Cliff, in the Ritz Café, and she was married and pregnant by the time she turned 20. The couple moved to the bottom apartment of an old Victorian boarding house on Bunker Hill.

“It was actually a nice place,” says Walker fondly. “There was a big yard out back with avocado trees. You could just go out and pick them.”

But married life wasn't easy. Cliff, a heavy drinker, was rarely home, spending most of his time on Main Street. Cliff was apparently quite talkative during his drinking spells, because shortly after their marriage, a young filmmaker named Kent Mackenzie stopped by the house to talk to Walker.

“Cliff must have told him about me,” says Walker, “because he just came by one day and asked if I wanted to be in a movie. Kent wanted someone who didn't hang out in the bars all the time.”

And that is how, pregnant, her world as chaotic and tumultuous as it had ever been, Yvonne Walker saw her life put to film.

On December 8, 1974, Moses Yakanac, a 47-year-old Native Alaskan, was knifed to death in a Skid Row alleyway. Alone and adrift, most likely an alcoholic, Yakanac was an easy target, becoming the second victim (10 years after the first) of downtown's notorious “Skid Row Slasher.”

Though Yakanac's end was certainly atypical among American Indian émigrés to Los Angeles, the life he lived prior to his murder was hardly unique in its destitution. Yakanac was one of hundreds of American Indians stranded on Skid Row at the time.

“Indian Skid Row” recalls Hanav Geiogamah, director of the UCLA American Indian



The emergence of an Indian Skid Row and the murder of Moses Yakanac came at the tail end of the downtown Indian enclave. While the lives depicted in *The Exiles* bear little resemblance to such abject poverty, the film is anything but a rose-colored portrait of Native life. Its characters are complicated and troubled. Walker seems resigned to a life of hardship, projecting all hope for a happy future onto her unborn son, while Homer and Tommy live to drink and make trouble. Their antics seemingly mask a darker pain — the loss of their culture.

Yet despite the complexity of these characters, the film hasn't been immune to criticism.

“I used to teach film at USC in the '90s,” says John Morrill, one of three cinematographers who worked on *The Exiles*, “and when I showed my students the film, many of them told me it was racist. They thought it was stereotyping drunk Indians.”

Even Thom Andersen, whose regard for the film helped to launch its rediscovery, seems to accept at face value the pallor of fatalism, calling *The Exiles* “a movie about drunk Indians and the women they mistreat or neglect.”

In an essay in the July issue of *Film Comment*, Andersen latches on to one of the film’s undercurrents — the existential pain, stemming from the loss of culture, that accompanied the move from reservation to city. Andersen notes one of the final scenes, in which Indians from all over the city gather on “Hill X,” an empty lot overlooking downtown, to dance, drum, chant and let loose without the interference of the white world.

“There, they try to reclaim that cyclical, preindustrial time,” he writes, “but their effort to revive the old ceremonies and solidarities breaks up into almost desultory sexual assaults and fistfights.”

Andersen goes on to note that even Hill X, as unsatisfying a replacement for reservation tradition as it was, was bulldozed shortly after the film to make way for Dodger Stadium.

“*The Exiles* is the most concrete and detailed record we have of these doomed spaces,” he concludes.

Andersen is right — these spaces have disappeared. But rather than a railing against the dying of the light, as it were, by Natives unsuccessfully struggling to keep the ancient ways alive, the climactic fracas depicted in *The Exiles* is actually something relatively new — a pan-Indian phenomenon not unique to any specific tribe. The practice, called “49-ing,” originated in Oklahoma, and at the time of *The Exiles* it would have been a fairly recent development on the West Coast.

Orly Olivier

(Click to enlarge)



CELIA'S Geiogamah. “But since that doesn’t happen much anymore, it’s become a way for young people to let loose, to deal with all the stress they’re facing.”

All new cultures suffer growing pains, and pan-Indianism was no different. The rebellious nature of 49-ing helped give birth to the American Indian Movement and to the American Indian political consciousness of the 1960s.

And although Hill X was leveled, emerging pan-Indian traditions didn’t fade. They migrated to the streets.

“I remember having a massive 49 on Main Street in 1965,” says Geiogamah. “A couple of guys brought their drums, and we raised all kinds of hell in a parking lot until the police shut us down around 2 a.m.”

“That was my Saturday night,” says Indian artist, actor and early *Exiles* enthusiast Ben-Alex Dupris. “Good or bad, *The Exiles* speaks to our id.”

Dupris hopes the re-release of *The Exiles* will spur an Indian cultural renaissance, and that the film’s unapologetic portrayal of urban Indians will help to validate a lifestyle that has often been seen as “un-Indian.”

“I think Native people are in a cultural depression,” he says. “They feel burdened by every aspect of our traditional lives.”

Dupris may get his wish: Doug Miles of Apache Skateboards, who hails from the same San Carlos reservation as Yvonne Walker, is already planning to launch an *Exiles*-inspired skateboard line.

Celebrated Indian author Sherman Alexie, however, is skeptical of any wider cultural impact *The Exiles* could have on the Indian world. “I doubt most Indians will pay much attention,” he says. Nonetheless, Alexie, who, together with African-American filmmaker Charles Burnett, is credited as a presenter of the *Exiles* reissue, is delighted a film has come along that captures the urban Indian life.

“Far too many Indians and non-Indians see the creation of a new culture as the death of the old one,” Alexie says. “This is beautiful strife. The film is honest. Life is painful and these characters are suffering. That’s not stereotype, it’s realism.”

Alexie, whose own mother was part of the Urban Indian Relocation Program (“She took a bus to Sacramento, got off, got a cup of coffee, and went right back to the reservation”), further praises *The Exiles* for capturing subtleties of Indian life in a way no other film has managed to do. He points to an early scene, in which Tommy helps to shave the sideburns of a self-conscious friend.

“You don’t see that kind of tender moment in films about Indians — one friend helping

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5th, notes Hanay Geogaganan, “The one thing about *The Exiles* is that the title implies these folks are somehow banished or disconnected from their home. But a lot of [Native] people came here on their own accord. They prospered here. This is their home.”

In one of the opening scenes of *The Exiles*, Yvonne Walker window shops through the various stalls of the Grand Central Market on Broadway. She browses but buys nothing — a somber look on her face that implies a life of austerity. Her thoughts turn to her unborn child.

“I want my baby to grow up here,” she says. “To speak English and maybe go to college. I want him to have the things I didn’t have in my life.”

Back at her home in Bellflower, Walker sits on a plush beige couch in her living room, reflecting on that life. She and Cliff stayed together for two years in their Bunker Hill apartment. She hoped the birth of their first child would settle him down, but it didn't. He continued to drink and stay out all night. After two years, Walker left him. Tragedy followed.

“I moved back to the reservation for a few months to get away from Cliff. The water isn't so good there and the baby took ill — diarrhea and dehydration. He passed.”

Walker moved back to Los Angeles and got a job in the aerospace industry. Cliff eventually went back to Oklahoma, where he was originally from. He died of diabetes years ago. Before she and Cliff broke up for good, however, Walker had another son with him — James.

Though he and his mother were close, James never knew about her film debut. “He and I did get a role together on that show *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman*,” Walker laughs.

A couple of years ago, James met the same fate as his father, succumbing to complications from diabetes.

“He was 47,” Walker says, pointing to a framed, smiling picture that rests next to a computer.

After Cliff, Walker married an American man she met on Main Street. They had five children together, but he, too, had alcohol problems, and the marriage ended. Today, the walls of her apartment are lined with pictures of her children and grandchildren. Walker smiles with pride and points to her oldest daughter, Betty.

“She's a nurse now,” Walker says. “She was thinking about going to medical school, but she's doing pretty good where she's at.”



one who found it unconscionable that Walker could raise a family without a husband.

“I lived for my kids,” she says. “And I have to give it to myself, I did pretty good by them. They all have good jobs. They're on their own and they're doing well.”


Despite her hardships, things didn't work out badly for Walker, either. After her time in the aerospace industry, she spent 17 years working for the L.A. County Registrar/Recorder. Now she's retired with Social Security and a pension. She goes to powwows when she can, and her kids are all proud of their Indian heritage. She visits the reservation often but has no plans to move back. She's happy where she is.

“For all I’ve been through, I’m actually amazed things worked out as well as they did,” she says. “God must have been looking out for me.”

Click here for [Jim Ridley's review of The Exiles.](#)

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