



Zitkala-Sa (Gertrude Simmons Bonnin)

Dakota Images

Gertrude Simmons Bonnin, who was also well known as Zitkala-Sa ("Red Bird"), was an articulate and literate activist for the American Indian. A Yankton Dakota, she was born in 1875 on a reservation in southern Dakota and was educated there until she entered White's Institute, a Quaker missionary school in Wabash, Indiana. At age 19, she entered Earlham College, and after graduation, she taught at Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania. She also studied at the Boston Conservatory of Music and in 1900 accompanied the Carlisle Band to Paris as chaperone and violin soloist.

In 1901, Zitkala-Sa's first book, *Old Indian Legends*, was published, and she was back in Dakota, working as a clerk on the Standing Rock Reservation. She married a Sioux-French accountant named Raymond Bonnin in 1902, and together they worked for the Indian Service, serving in South Dakota and on the Uintah Indian Reservation in Utah. In 1911, Gertrude Bonnin became active in the Society of American Indians, and when she became secretary of the organization in 1916, the Bonnins moved to Washington, D.C.

By 1916, Zitkala-Sa was an accomplished lecturer, her training at the conservatory adding to her dramatic presence. She was a bold speaker, critical of the white man's treatment of American Indians, and she never hesitated to tell audiences her opinion of United States policies, the BIA, or the "acquisitive white conquerors." She also stressed the value of the American Indians' native religions and social mores. She wrote both fiction and nonfiction, contributing to magazines and authoring books. Her subject matter was often the Sioux Indian tradition by which she was raised.

In 1926, she formed the National Council of American Indians and served as its president until her death. Zitkala-Sa was a tireless worker and lobbyist for Indian legislation, and she is most often commended for her work in securing the active interest of the General Federation of Women's Clubs in the welfare of the American Indians. The influence of the Federation of Women's Clubs and of others resulted in the appointment of a federal commission to study Indian conditions under the direction of the Lewis Meriam. Zitkala-Sa served as an advisor for the commission.

Zitkala-Sa (Gertrude Simmons Bonnin) was sixty-one years old when she died in Washington, D.C. in 1938.

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