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Indigenous struggles

Dennis J. Banks, Naawakamig (1937–2017)

- IV Online magazine - 2017 - IV515 - December 2017 -

Publication date: Friday 1 December 2017

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In a world where Native people had little power, American Indian Movement cofounder Dennis Banks was a force.

Naawakamig “In the Center of the Universe” was his Anishinaabe name. But to most, he was known by his Anglo name: Dennis J. Banks.

Born on the Leech Lake Reservation in 1937 Ojibwe territory in present-day Minnesota Banks became a force in a world where Native people rarely mattered.

He cofounded the American Indian Movement (AIM) in Minneapolis, Minnesota in 1968 and, along with AIM, played a starring role in the liberation of [Wounded Knee](#) in 1973 a radical, insurgent moment of [indigenous revolution](#). Under Banks’s leadership, AIM became the most powerful Native movement of the twentieth century, galvanizing indigenous people throughout the United States, Canada, and beyond.

“We were the prophets, the messengers, the fire-starters,” Banks wrote in his autobiography, *Ojibwa Warrior*, cowritten with Richard Erdoes. “Out of AIM came a new breed of writers, poets, artists, actors, and filmmakers.”

Banks who passed away last week in Rochester, Minnesota at the age of eighty spent his earliest years crammed into a small house with his extended family on the reservation. The lone luxury item in his grandmother’s home was a battery-powered radio that delivered news of the World War his father, Walter Chase, a man he only met a few times, was off fighting.

When Banks was just five years old, a Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) agent kidnapped him and his siblings, wrenching them from their grandmother’s home, kicking and screaming, and taking them three hundred miles away to an Indian boarding school. When they arrived, they were stripped of their clothes and doused with DDT. Their long hair was cut. Over months and years, their Anishinaabe language was quite literally beaten out of them.

“I could not wait to go to bed,” Banks later wrote in his autobiography. “I pretended in my daydreams that I could fly fly through the air to my old Indian home.”

Scores of Native families and children had the same horrifying experience. Removal was standard government policy, the latest front in a centuries-long war against Indians.

Banks did not see his family for nine years after his abduction, and it took even longer before he could return to his old Indian home with the battery-powered radio.

In 1954, at the age of seventeen, Banks enlisted in the Air Force to escape dire poverty. While stationed in Japan, he witnessed protests against the United States’ occupation. He abandoned his post in the occupying force and fell in love with a Japanese woman, Machiko Inouye, whom he married. They had a daughter together, Michiko. He was eventually arrested, court martialed, and shipped back to the United States for going AWOL, leaving behind his Japanese family, whom he never saw again.

Banks returned to Minneapolis, remarried, this time to Jeanette Banks, and had four more children. But money and

jobs were scarce in the Twin Cities — especially for the Native underclass. Banks was arrested multiple times, often in violent police raids on the Indian bars that dotted the blocks of the “Red Ghetto.” Like hundreds of other Native people, mostly young men, Banks churned in and out of the criminal justice system. The jail cells of adulthood replaced the boarding schools of his youth.

In 1966, he was indicted on burglary charges for stealing groceries to feed his family. When he violated parole, he was sent upstate to Stillwater prison. There he read about indigenous history and was inspired by the revolutionary zeitgeist of the late 1960s.

“Sitting in that jail cell I began to understand there was a hell of a goddamn movement going on that I wasn’t a part of, the antiwar movement, the Black Panther movement, the civil rights movement, the Students for a Democratic Society,” Banks remembered. “I began to see that the greatest war was going to go on right here in the United States, and I began to realize that there was a hell of a situation in this country — all these different kinds of people trying so hard to straighten this country out.”

The war against Native life — which permanently shaped his own life — weighed on Banks’s soul. “The chances for creating an effective Indian rights organization were passing us by,” he recalled. “Are we going to sit here in Minnesota and not do a goddamn thing?”

On the evening of July 28, 1968, just two months after Banks got out of prison, two hundred people packed the basement of a rundown Minneapolis church for a meeting about Indian civil rights. Heated conversation turned, almost immediately, to a radical plan to stop police brutality. It was out of this discussion that the American Indian Movement was born.

AIM’s founders — Banks, Pat Bellanger, George Mitchell, and Clyde Bellecourt — envisioned more than just a protest movement. They aimed to not only end police brutality, but also poverty, housing, and employment discrimination, and the forcible removal of Native children from their homes.

Before the braids and shades, AIM was an institution builder in the urban communities it served, founding [survival schools](#) that taught Native history and culture and provided employment, housing, and legal advocacy for Native families. After AIM arrived on the scene, police raids on Indian bars all but stopped. At the same time, a more subtle cultural transformation was afoot: the downtrodden of the Red Ghettos were proud to be Indian again.

Part of that newfound confidence sprung from a new generation of strong leaders. In 1969, at an education conference, Banks befriended Russell Means, a firebrand Oglala orator and organizer. The two men, handsome and sharp, became the spokesmen of the movement (often overshadowing the central roles of women like Phyllis Young, Madonna Thunderhawk, Nilak Butler, Mabel Anne Phillips, and many more).

Soon, AIM would begin to make its mark outside of Minneapolis.

AIM Goes National

In February 1972, two white men beat Oglala elder Raymond Yellow Thunder to death in Gordon, Nebraska, a town bordering the Pine Ridge Reservation.

AIM sprung into action. They brought a thousand Native people to Gordon, and won convictions for the two men, who would have faced little to no punishment otherwise. The impressive mobilization helped AIM, a primarily urban organization, earn the respect and trust of Lakota country “€” solidarity that endured into the [Wounded Knee](#) days. (During the Yellow Thunder protests, Banks also met his future wife, Darlene Kamook Nichols, with whom he would live for fourteen years and have four children.)

Later that year, in November 1972, AIM and seven other Native organizations from the United States and Canada led a cross-country “[Trail of Broken Treaties](#)” to Washington, D.C., carrying a twenty-point position paper and asserting Native demands for sovereignty and justice. Government officials refused to meet with representatives of the caravan. In response, Banks and AIM led an occupation of the BIA offices.

“All of us are political prisoners,” said a defiant Banks at a press conference during the occupation. “Only with general assembly approval will we release this building. The other alternative is for them to take it by force.”

The occupation won Banks and AIM few supporters among the liberal establishment. It did, however, herald their arrival as a national movement.

By the early 1970s, there were seventy-nine AIM chapters and sixteen survival schools across the country. Like the [Ghost Dance](#) of the late nineteenth century, an anticolonial, pan-indigenous movement was sweeping like prairie fire through North America. Radical and emboldened Native resistance put AIM on the radar of the international press “€” and of the FBI’s notorious [COINTELPRO](#) program.

But it was the occupation of Wounded Knee that would truly thrust AIM into the public spotlight.

The episode originated as a pitched battle with the tribal chairman at South Dakota’s Pine Ridge Reservation, a domineering man named Dick Wilson. The Ogala Sioux Civil Rights Organization, tired of Wilson’s authoritarian ways, called on AIM to help remove him. They obliged, showing up in a fifty-four-car caravan and seizing control of the reservation. The confrontation quickly went federal, though, and the US military swept in to try to dislodge the militants.

During the seventy-one-day standoff that ensued, federal marshals killed two people: Cherokee activist Frank Clearwater, shot in his sleep during a firefight, and Oglala activist Buddy Lamont, gunned down by a federal sniper during a ceasefire. While the militants finally surrendered, the battle had energized the indigenous movement around the world.

In the aftermath of Wounded Knee, Wilson led a violent crackdown on AIM and its supporters, a dark time known as “the reign of terror.” At least fifty-seven Native people were murdered on the reservation as the FBI turned a blind eye.

Not content to just look the other way, federal law enforcement also worked to systematically dismember the organization. The FBI infiltrated AIM’s ranks and hit its members with a litany of charges designed to put defiant fists in handcuffs. Law enforcement spun more than 400 arrests and 275 indictments out of Wounded Knee. Few of these charges stuck, but the strategy proved highly effective. AIM members turned on each other. Banks’s own bodyguard, Doug Durham, turned out to be an informant.

“There was a lot going on that made the paranoia believable,” Banks told the [New York Times](#) in 2014. “It became impossible to trust anybody.”

Darlene Nichols, Banks's wife, became a paid FBI informant in 1988. Decades later, Nichols and the late AIM leader John Trudell testified that Banks had knowledge of the death of two figures: Ray Robinson "a black civil rights activist who went missing during Wounded Knee and was never found" and Anna Mae Aquash, an outspoken Mi'kmaq activist from Canada who was found on the Pine Ridge reservation in 1976 with a bullet in the back of her skull.

Yet if the FBI had solid evidence against AIM leaders, they undoubtedly would have been charged. Banks never was. To this day, we have more narratives of dubious origin than hard facts about what actually happened to either Robinson or Aquash. Banks, for his part, maintained his innocence.

"However these people got put up to putting the bullet in Annie Mae, I already know all I need to," Banks told the *Times*. "The government set the stage for anybody in the movement to think that Annie Mae was a fed."

Banks's Legacy

Banks spent a great deal of his life on the run "from authorities, but also, perhaps, from personal struggles. He lost and remade homes around the world, from Leech Lake to Japan, from California to Kentucky. Along the way, he fathered nineteen children.

In 1984, he surrendered to authorities, spending a year in prison. Later in life, he applied his good looks and charisma to a few movie roles. And he continued to organize. In 2006, he led the Sacred Run from Alcatraz to Washington, DC. In 2016, he ran as vice president for the Peace and Freedom Party, a socialist ticket in California.

Throughout his eighty years, Banks embraced a wide variety of struggles "Palestinian resistance, Irish independence, the South African anti-apartheid movement. He opposed American wars in the Middle East and supported the Cuban and Venezuelan revolutions.

Banks made history "but history also made him. He brought pride and progress to Native people. To generations more distant from AIM's heyday, he is regarded as a hero. During the stand against the Dakota Access Pipeline last year, Banks imparted courage to the Water Protectors, who flew the AIM flag and sang the AIM song.

The struggle for Native liberation bookended his life, from cradle to grave. His actions were, to some, regrettable.

But whatever his limitations, this much is inescapable: he was a Red Ghetto rebel, authentically of his people. And he fought for the indigenous the only way he knew how "perhaps the only way one might expect a man to fight in the face of abduction and abuse, grave poverty built on land theft, and generations of despair gathered in crowded homes and dark bars with only the spirit of his ancestors and a radio to his name.

11 June 2017

[Jacobin](#)

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