

For Pratap Rughani:NEB:VOA

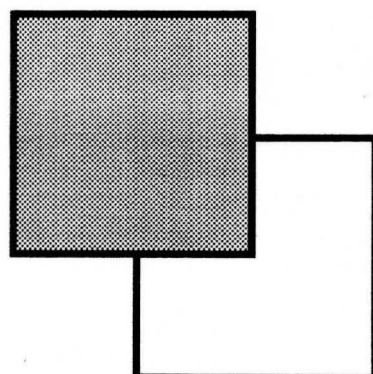
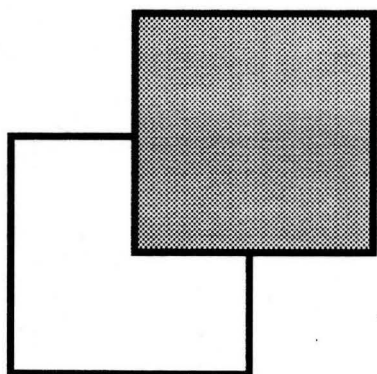
BILLY TAYAC

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Pratap Rughani V.O.A. Green Corn Festival, Ackokeek, Maryland.

INTERVIEW WITH BILLY TAYAC, PISCATOWAY CHIEF. 30/8/87.

At the time of European contact there was an estimated 12,000 Piscatoway Indians, they're the native people of southern Maryland, northern Virginia and Washington D.C. Presently there's only 97 enrolled Piscatoway Indians. That's very important - these are Piscatoway Indians beyond a shadow of a doubt, people we know are Piscatoway Indians. Presently we're on Moyaone. This land here is extremely sacred to us - what we call the sacred burial ground - the sacred twenty acres of land here. After contact with the European people a reservation was set up which included three miles down the river, five miles inland and over the years the reservation shrank, people sold, people traded for pieces of land and eventually it came down to just twenty acres of land here.

In the middle of the nineteenth century the state of Maryland created a deed to this land here. It's very important to realise that no Piscatoway ever ceded this land - the twenty acres - to any government or person. So we still feel that we have ownership of this land. Our treaty called for this land to be held for us forever, in perpetuity so we feel that this twenty acres is ours. We've been struggling for pretty close to sixty or seventy years to get this land returned to us. Our people came here in the early part of the twentieth century - they had to come here for their ceremonies secretly. They just came down, they call it the dark period for the Piscatoway, for Indians in the United States. They called Indians the vanishing Indians,

people were afraid to admit they were Indians because there were no jobs available. You were caught in a society that was strictly black or white. There were black or white schools but no Indian schools. It was a time of survival. So people came here for their ceremonies secretly and these ceremonies were held over and over and over. What happened in the 1920s and 30s a lady by the name of Mrs Ferguson acquired this land. They call their farm "Hard Bargain Farm" because she bought it and the title was so cloudy that she had to buy it again. She was the daughter of a rear admiral so she was southern white gentry. There was also a class system involved. She discovered artefacts - common on the Potomac, Chesapeake bay...She realised that she had come across a major find.

When I was a boy they took out seven thousand skeletal remains from the ground in the 1940s and they were taken to the Smithsonian Institute and they are presently in the same boxes - it's a complete desecration to us. The best way to explain it is if somebody had the power to capture a Christian soul and hold it captive that's the worst thing that could happen to it. What they've done to these people here they're holding them captive, they've interfered with our religious beliefs, the religious beliefs of these people who were buried here. It's complete desecration - if you applied to pull out some European's remains from a graveyard in the 1600s and 1700s here, there'd be uproar. It's a dual standard. You have got to understand that they have an attitude that they're only Indians. They have an attitude - they use the word prehistoric people. I'd like to point out that our history did not start in 1492 with Columbus coming to our land. Our history, where

we're standing today, has been documented by archeologists - my people have lived here for 15 thousand years. So we're dealing with a government, with a society that thinks that Indians' history began in 1492... Indian people here were the greatest agriculturalists in the world. At the time of European contact the average life expectancy for the Indian was pretty close to 70 yrs old, average height was well over 5'5" maybe 5'10, 6ft. Average life expectancy for the European was forty, height 5ft. They came and took a lot of crops that people see today. The potato, known as the Irish potato. That was native to this land - it was taken to Ireland during the 1848 famine. Tobacco was here, sweet potato was here, corn. There was a great variety of crops here, there was no need to be nomadic people. Here on this spot by the Potomac river there are fish that run up this river today that [...are thick enough to make the water black.]

WHAT ARE THE PISCATOWAY DOING NOW TO HAVE THIS LAND RETURNED ?

I'm what you call a new Indian - they've educated us, Indians today are questioning their laws, people today have to take into consideration, number one that we're the only people who had citizenship forced upon them in this country. Indians were not citizens of this country until 1924...The Indian Citizenship Act. Indians rejected that but it was forced on them. They had problems dealing with the traditional governments, the chiefs, the councils, on account that the Indian people were pressing for land, pressing for rights and they forced upon Indian people in 1934 what is known as the Wheeler Higher Act, which almost completely destroyed the traditional Indian

governments because they set up corporations which were foreign to Indian ways of thinking. Indians are communal people, we feel that we have to live in a society and adapt to it by the way, but we feel that the earth does not belong to us, we're just caretakers of the earth. Into the 20th century Indians started getting educated. Indians started pressing for their rights. In the 1970s the American Indian movement exploded in the United States. Indians started demanding rights that they thought were taken away from them.

WHAT HAPPENED HERE DURING THAT PERIOD ?

In the late 1950s they started talking about building a sludge depot on this spot right here and my father was deeply worried about that. There was talk about creating a park here called Piscataway park to keep the sludge depot from coming here and Turkey was deeply afraid of our people being buried under the modern waste of Washington D.C. and that through the efforts of a lot of people this park was formed. Turkey never ceded his rights, the Piscataway rights to this park. He said he would cooperate in helping to establish this park with conditions: No. 1. that he could be buried here when he died (he was born in 1895) and we'd have the right to continue our ceremonies here forever.

Secretary of the Interior Utah, he agreed to that....in the 70s people suggested that Turkey check his burial rights here and these rights were guaranteed to him in the late 50s and 60s and when he checked his burial rights after heavy persuasion in the 70s he found that he didn't have any. They were all lies to get this land. He panicked. The only person he could go to at that time was the Indian Land Claims Commission, a man called Judge Harvyn Maxton and they realised that

the only way he could be buried here because he was of advanced age was through an Act of Congress. A bill was introduced in '76 and didn't make it through. A bill was introduced in '77 and didn't make it. He died Dec. 8th 1978. Now they thought that the problem here was over with. Turkey talked for years and years and years that he wanted to be buried here with the ancestors. The Department of the Interior refused. The Alice Ferguson Foundation refused...The Alice Ferguson Foundation are southern white gentry, they're highly racist, they feel that they own the land, they feel that they can deny people their First Amendment rights, they feel that they're in total control...if Alice. F. was alive she wouldn't permit what's going on here today..

When Turkey died in '78, they thought the problem with Turkey was over with. There was a relief, saying that the old chief's dead, the problem will go away now. But we didn't bury him. We held him in a mausoleum and we pressed for the right for him to be buried here which was his natural right. The Dept. of the Interior refused, the Fergusons refused, we in turn went anywhere to speak to groups of three, groups of five thousand all over this country. International press coverage. All he wanted was a grave, to be buried here with his people. Finally, through the efforts of Philip Burton, Cong. from San Francisco, Sen. Sorbanes and Mat Mathias a breakthrough came and they allowed him to be buried here so we buried him on Nov. 11th 1979...the Fergusons would not allow us to bring the herse down the road. We had to hand carry my father in a casket over a mile and a half in pouring rain because they refused. The Dept. of the Interior argued back and forth about the shape of the grave, the marker on the grave, how we

intended to bury him, everything, back and forth. They even argued back and forth that this was not an Indian site even though it was on the National Historic Register as an Indian site. They argued back and forth that it was not a cemetery even though this is the most documented archeological dig in the United States...over 20,000 Indian remains. This land is laced with the bones of the ancient people. So we buried him here. It was a bone in the throat of the Ferguson Foundation. Prior to his burial here we used to have 24 hr. a day free-flow access to this site. This is the only surviving Indian religious site on the East Coast of the United States. We feel that if we have a problem and we wish to pray to God at 3 o'clock in the morning, we should have the right to come here...

Since Turkey's burial we've had great difficulty with the Alice Ferguson Foundation, great difficulty with the Dept. of the Interior. There used to be 3 to 400 people used to come here, could park your cars in a certain area, pitch your tents in a certain area, we could come here any time, no problem whatsoever. Now we have been reduced to just two cars on this land. We're not allowed to come in that way above us. They've built an alternative way across the swamp. That does not solve our problem because we have people who are invalids. This bridge spans pretty close to a mile across the swamp. They say that if our invalid and elderly people want to come down here to pray they've got to get across that bridge the best way they can. They can crawl if they have to but they're not going to allow the people to come down that road with a vehicle. The Alice Ferguson Foundation - this burial ground is like a bottle. The vehicular road has to come through the the

neck of the bottle, the cork in the bottle is the Alice Ferguson Foundation. They have been a great, great, great problem to us. We've offered to try and cooperate with them but they don't want to cooperate with us. They're an elite club for the southern white gentry.

WHAT ARE THEIR PLANS FOR THIS LAND?

Their plans don't include us. The Dept. of the Interior's plans don't include us. You can pick up any of the literature you want that they put out today and you'll never find mention that we're on this land. You'll never see that chief Turkey was buried here through an Act of Congress. You'll never see that we hold our ceremonies on this ground. Let me tell you the extent that we've carried our case - we've been in Congress for the last 15 years. They don't know what to do with us. In the 1980s we went to the International Indian gathering in Whiteearth, Minnesota and they selected four main cases in the U.S. to deal with Indians, ours was one of the cases. We sent a delegate in 1981 to Geneva, Switzerland, the case was heard before the United Nations, the U.N. condemned the Dept. of the Interior on their treatment of us here, but they don't have any teeth to enforce it. We've had a tremendous amount of publicity here...but signs to this burial ground have been taken down. They're trying to keep a low profile of Indians as though Indians do not exist any more. What they're trying to do is to make Indians into something in the past. They want to put us on a dark archeological shelf and say yes the Indians were a wonderful people but they are no longer here. We've done everything for the Indian people. The only thing they ever done for us they took everything we had. That's fact. They took our land, they've tried to take our identity, they

tried to take our religion, they tried to take our customs, they tried to take our traditions. We're people who are trying to hold on, all over the United States, trying to hold on to what they believe in. That's what we're trying to do right here, to hold on. We find it very hard in the twentieth century. We see lies, people came to this land and said Thou shalt not kill. There's only 97 of us, at the time of contact there were 12, 000. Where's the rest of us at ? They said "Thou shalt not steal", we don't own an inch of land according to their law system...they've taken everything and yet they keep pressing they keep pressing. They have their propaganda that they put out, like the Lone Ranger and Tonto, people have the John Wayne mentality that the only Indian is a good Indian or Indians in the past. When we go the Dept. of the Interior they tell us your treaty lies with the Queen of England, go see the Queen of England because after the American revolution they say our treaty was terminated but these large tracts of land that were so called given by the King of England to these white gentry, their land was'nt terminated. These large grants that were given to the church groups, their land was'nt terminated but the Indian land was terminated and they've tried to do everything to us - and the word I'm going to use is clear-cut, beyond a shadow of a doubt - the United States is guilty of genocide against the Indian people, particularly in the East and that is not in the past, today, I can check it out, in Arizona the Navajo Hopi, the U.S. government is trying to remove them off their land by force. And we're not talking 1785, or 1865, we're talking 1987...and the issue is the land. They feel that might makes right and they feel that they can take anything away from Indian people and because they believe that they're right it doesn't matter. As long as you become carbon copies of

them they like you but if you are different, if your views are different, if your traditions are different, if your customs are different they feel that it's their God-given right to change them. What they fail to realise, and we have pity on them for this is that the same god they pray to on sundays is the same god we pray to seven days a week and they will have their just dues...

So this is why we hold on here, we hold four ceremonies here a year there's the Green Corn Festival, the Feast of the Dead which we have in November. The Green Corn Festival is a festival where you give thanks to the Creator for the Harvest, for everything he's provided for you. The Green Corn Festival is where we pay respect to the ancestors in the Spirit World. We have the mid-Winter Festival where we share the kind of food that we have, in ancient days we used to come together to see who was alive and who was not alive and who needed food and who needed clothing and we carry that on today and try to share it with each other and in the spring we have what we call the Awakening of Mother Earth when the Earth awakens and we thank the Creator very much for awakening the grass, the trees, the animals, everybody awakening back up to life. We talk about the original instructions given to us by the Creator and I'd like to point out that the Jews were not the only people given original instructions, we were also given original instructions, that's why we pray with tobacco, that was given to us...

The United States are what I call the bastard son of England. They've inherited Britain's role of policemen in the world...They've tried to take their customs and traditions and introduced their Pizza Huts and their MacDonalds and their religion, their ways. It seems that they feel it's their god-given right and this goes back to1580 when the Christians had a conference in Spain and the Christians wanted to know whether the Indians were human or not human and one of the main things they discovered was that there was no accountability for Indians in the bible. Therefore it was their god-given right, by right of discovery and by right of Christianisation to take the land from the Indian and to Christianise the Indian people. We were dealing with a time in Europe when religious fervour exploded. The Church of England breaking away from the Catholic church, the Spanish Inquisition, the search for souls, the conquest for souls and there are people here who were the first Catholic converts, the oldest continuous Catholic church in the U.S. is located not 15 miles from here. We gave the Jesuits 7,000 acres of land, the Jesuits, they won't give us one inch of land, so who's more Christian, them or us.

TELL US SOMETHING ABOUT THIS PARTICULAR PIECE OF LAND.

This piece of land is on the edge of the Potomac river. We're directly across the river from George Washington's home, Mount Vernon. We've been on this land, known as the Ackokeek site, for 15,000 years. We're the only people that I know of that still hold their ceremonies on the ancient land... There were a tremendous amount of Indians who lost their identity, who assimilated, who just knew that they were of

Indian heritage - that's another form of genocide by the way, it's subtle - they no longer do it with the slash of a sword or a shot of a gun. How they do it today is with their laws, subtle laws...but when you get up and you speak like this, you talk like this to them, they call you an agitator, they call you a militant, they call you an uncooperative person...This is the year of the American Constitution, 200 yr. celebration of it, and yet there was no religious freedom for Indians written into it so in 1978, 202 yrs. after the Declaration of Independence, they passed a law called the American Indian Religious Freedom Act which is supposed to give Indians religious freedom to their sites over public and private land if need be 24 hours a day. It's a beautiful law but with no teeth to enforce it. It's just a piece of paper, a showcase for the world. I went to a meeting, they were talking about dealing with the Act, and everybody in that group was white, there wasn't an Indian on the panel and they were going to tell us how we were going to adapt to it as if we're children but before they come to us and tell us how to worship God they'd better get their own act together...

It's very difficult being a traditional Indian in the modern society today.

IS IT POSSIBLE FOR AMERICAN INDIANS GROWING UP NOW TO BE PART OF BOTH WORLDS ?

They have to be part of both worlds, but you have to be extremely careful because if not you'll disappear.....

Finally through the efforts of Philip Burton and other people, she was buried here. They say there'll be no problem with the burial site if you just dig your father up and move him out. This was less than four years ago. There's even been talk of trying to dig Turkey up and trying to compare him with an Indian who died in the 18th century, so it's a continuing thing. We're going to hang on here and they're not going to dig anybody up here. We have a moratorium. If they try to dig anybody up here then all hell's going to break loose. Let them go dig their own father up. We don't even want the ancient people buried to be dug up here because it interferes with their religious beliefs and our religious beliefs and that's the struggle.

MINORITIES.

The Black community want to be integrated totally into the American dream. They want a share of the pie but the difference is - there's still a lot of racism in this country - a lot of white people who face to face will treat the Black person as an equal but really don't even want them to move in next door to them. There's a subtle racism. The Indians don't want to be integrated into the society. We're a separate people, we're fighting to remain a separate people... That's the racism that's in this country, it's ingrained in people ingrained in them that Third World people, people of colour are inferior. They believe it in their heart. I'm not talking about every person now. I'm talking about as a race of people throughout history they've been that way' they've been that way today...

They like the Indian people as long as they stay non-vocal, as long as they say I want part of that dream, but as soon as you start saying "I want part of my land back", the first thing they say is "God, they want to throw me out of my house" We were thrown out of our house. They took everything. Why shouldn't we have something of our own ? That's the struggle here. There's nothing here. There's twenty acres of land TWENTY ACRES of land from maybe millions of acres of land. There's not a house on this land, there's not a couple of benches here. There's a corn field, there's nothing here and they won't even give us this land back. I close with this remark, my father told me, he said "Billy, they won't give us an inch of land to the north, to the south, an inch of land to the east, an inch of land to the west. They don't even want us to have an inch of land here. They don't even want me to have the right to be buried here - my God, what do they think I'm going to do ? Pollute this earth ?"

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