

Along the Robeson Trail

By Dr. Stan Knick, Director-UNCP Native American Resource Center

(Note: This segment was co-authored by Dr. Linda E. Oxendine. Along with the following few segments, it will soon be published as a chapter in *Native American Studies in Higher Education: Models for Collaboration between Universities and Indigenous Nations*, edited by Duane Champagne and Jay Stauss.)

The American Indian Studies Department grew up among the ashes. When someone proposed in the early 1970s that historic Old Main Building be torn down to make way for a new building, many people in the local Native American community were outraged. Their beloved Old Main, the first brick structure of the old Indian Normal School, had been a central part of their lives since 1923.

Even before the proposal to destroy Old Main, the seeds of an American Indian Studies Department had already been germinating. For as long as anyone here could remember, the Native Americans of Robeson County had been asserting their Indian identity. In virtually every decade since the 1860s they had expressed their Native heritage at local, state and/or national levels (Sider 1993; Evans 1971; McPherson 1915; McMillan 1888). In addition, the heightening cross-cultural consciousness which accompanied the American Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, and the associated development of ethnic studies departments at colleges and universities across the country,

augmented the growing desire for an American Indian Studies Department here in the land of the Lumbee. Old Main Building was exactly the right location for it.

All kinds of activities had been held inside Old Main's walls — the administration of the college, the teaching of classes, public gatherings and film presentations. Old Main had become a tangible symbol of opportunities in higher education for Lumbees. For much of Old Main's history, local Native Americans had not even been allowed to attend the state's other institutions of higher learning.

Lumbee people weren't about to let Old Main go without a struggle. Marches were organized. Songs were sung. Poems were written. Politicians were called and visited. Support was enlisted. The voice of the Save Old Main Movement was heard all over North Carolina and throughout the United States.

Leo Vocu of the National Congress of American Indians and Louis Bruce of the Bureau of Indian Affairs both visited the community and spoke in favor of the preservation of Old Main. In their book *One Hundred Million Acres*, Kirke Kickingbird and Karen Ducheneaux equated the Lumbee struggle to save Old Main with the national struggle by people of many tribes and nations to hold onto traditional lands. Kickingbird and Ducheneaux observed that the state's attempt to close Old Main created "a direct

confrontation with the Lumbee community, which regarded the building as the only visible evidence of their once extensive tribal lands... Rallies were held to 'save Old Main' and the state surrendered (1973: 12)."

Virtually in the middle of the debate about the best course of action to take, Old Main mysteriously burned in 1973. With only a shell of walls remaining, it would have been easy for the people to quit. But something else remained, something unseen — the spirit of Old Main. Ruth Locklear Revels wrote in her poem, *I Am Old Main*: "...The walls that hold so many secrets, fears, memories, hopes, dreams and knowledge of those great men and women who were, are and will be the cornerstone of our community.... Destroy me, and I tell you, you destroy the very heart of the Lumbee people."

That spirit was kept alive by the Save Old Main Committee and others, and among the ashes arose a remodeled Old Main. Eventually it would become home to an academic Department of American Indian Studies, and to the Native American Resource Center.

Next week we will continue looking at the history of American Indian Studies at UNC Pembroke. For more information, visit the Native American Resource Center in historic Old Main Building, on the campus of The University of North Carolina at Pembroke (our Internet address is www.uncp.edu/nativemuseum).



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Dr. Jonathan Rich has joined the staff of SRMC. He is practicing internal medicine at both the Robeson County Health Department and the Dr. Arthur J. Robinson Medical Clinic.

A native of Long Valley, NJ, Dr. Rich earned his medical degree from the Kirksville College of Osteopathic Medicine in Kirksville, MO, in 1998. He completed both a one-year internship and a two-year residency in internal medicine at St. John/Detroit Riverview Hospital in Detroit in 2001. A recipient of a National Health Service Corps scholarship, Dr. Rich saw our area as offering the most interesting opportunity while fulfilling his service obligation.

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