

In my decade as Earlham's archivist, I have answered dozens of inquiries about alumni, some well-known, some of interest only because they were ancestors or relatives of the researcher. One Earlham student has been the subject of more requests for information than all others combined. She is a student of the 1890s, Gertrude Simmons, or, as she sometimes called herself, Zitkala-Sa, one of the small number of Native American students to attend Earlham.

Side by Side: ZITKALA-SA at EARLHAM 1895-1897

From campus to the center of American Indian activism.

by Tom Hamm

Today, she is of interest to scholars in a wide variety of disciplines because of her stature as a writer and activist for Native Americans from early in this century until her death in 1938.

Quakers had a long history of work among Indians, albeit with uncertain results. Friends saw themselves as engaging in the work of "uplift" and "civilization," work that often meant trying to eradicate virtually every survival of native culture through schools and other forms of missionary work. Indiana Friends had had a school and "model farm" among the Shawnee, first in Ohio and then in what is now Kansas, since the early nineteenth century. In 1850, with funds from a Philadelphia Friend, White's Institute was established in

Indiana to educate and "civilize" Native American children. The first Native American student at Earlham was Arizona Jackson, who came from the Indian Territory in 1880 and stayed to teach in Indiana. Zitkala-Sa, however, would be Earlham's best known Native American student, and would leave the most complete — and ambivalent — account of her experiences.

Zitkala-Sa, or Gertrude Simmons, was born on the Yankton Sioux reservation in the Dakota Territory in 1876. Her mother, Ellen Reaches-for-the-

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Wind, was a Yankton Nakota who bitterly resented the white conquest of her people. Her father, a white man named Felker, deserted his family, and her mother then married John H. Simmons, who was of French Canadian ancestry and whose name Gertrude took. Zitkala-Sa sought formal schooling over her mother's protests, and came east to White's Institute with the prediction that she would find that the whites told only lies. Her experiences at the Institute were bitter. The school officials' harsh treatment alienated her from Christianity for the rest of her life; indeed, one of her first published works was entitled "Why I Am a Pagan." Nonetheless she completed the course at White's, and then came to Earlham to enroll in the fall of 1895,



Zitkala-Sa in 1921, one of the prominent women attending the National Women's Party meeting in Washington, D.C.

defying her mother again.

The campus saw Zitkala-Sa as an exotic creature. "Her relations with other students were pleasant but somewhat distant," one remembered. "She walked alone about the campus intent on avoiding the fluffy dandelion heads she did not wish to injure." There were also stories that she would not study in her room on warm spring and autumn evenings, since she feared that moths would be attracted in through the open window and be injured in the flame of the gas jet. Nonetheless, if the *Earlhamite* is a reliable indicator, she led an active social life, often present at student gatherings and usually singing.

Zitkala-Sa's memories, however, were originally of loneliness and isolation. "As I hid myself in my little room in the college dormitory, away from the scornful and yet curious eyes of the students, I pined for sympathy," she later wrote. She was "among a cold race whose hearts were frozen hard with prejudice." Nevertheless, she determined to enter the college oratorical contest. To her astonishment, her oration, on women's suffrage, was cheered heartily, and students presented her with a large bouquet when she finished. She was even more astonished when she was awarded first place and the right to represent Earlham in the state contest in Indianapolis; it was unprecedented for a freshman to win. In consternation, she refused to attend the reception for her, but went back to her room to reconsider the hard feelings she had borne the other students.

The state contest in Indianapolis was a mixed experience. Zitkala-Sa rewrote her oration, "Side by Side," as a call for new understanding between Indians and whites. It was hardly a radical production; it praised the



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Opponents at the state oratorical contest complained that Earlham was represented by a "squaw."

"successful system of Indian education" that a "beneficent government" had created. Now it was the turn of Native Americans to come among the whites, seeking "skill in industry and in art, seeking labor and honest independence," seeking the treasures of knowledge and wisdom, seeking to comprehend the spirit of your laws and the genius of your noble institutions." All would "stand side by side . . . in ascribing royal honor" to the flag. "America, I love thee," she concluded. "Thy people shall be my people and thy God my God." Unfortunately, the state contests were always rowdy occasions, with insults and heckling common. Racial epithets were flung at her, and someone raised a banner mocking Earlham for being represented by a "squaw." There was bitter satisfaction for Zitkala-Sa in winning second place in the contest.

Earlham treated the second-place finish as a victory. When word came

late on Friday evening, the whole campus and the faculty within hearing were routed out of bed for a celebration. The campus was decorated with school colors, and a mounted escort conveyed Zitkala-Sa and the oratory coach, Edwin P. Trueblood, from the train station. There was a reception with numerous tributes to the victorious orator, with Zitkala-Sa responding "in a few well-chosen words."

Zitkala-Sa remained at Earlham only two years. In 1897 she left to teach at the Carlisle Indian School, then go on to study at the Boston Conservatory of Music. There she took the name Zitkala-Sa, meaning "red bird." In 1901 she began the literary career that would make her a well-known and respected champion of Indian rights and culture. Her book *American Indian Stories*, a collection of

Native American folklore and legends, although unappreciated when it was published in 1921, has gone through numerous editions and is now regarded by many as a classic work. In 1902 she married Capt. Raymond Bonnin, a fellow Nakota who worked for the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

In the last three decades of her life, she achieved national prominence through her work with groups like the Society of American Indians and the Indian Rights Association. She was fiercely critical of federal policies toward Native Americans, calling for the abolition of the Bureau of Indian Affairs and an end to attempts to obliterate Native American cultures. In 1926 she founded the National Council of American Indians, serving as its president until her death in 1938. Her ambivalence about Earlham remained, however, as after 1900 she cut virtually all ties with the college.