

## Zitkala-Ša

### “Leader in fight for American Indigenous Peoples’ Rights”

February 22, 1876 – January 26, 1938



Zitkala-Ša was born Red Bird on the Yankton Indian Reservation in South Dakota on February 22, 1876. Zitkala-Ša was a member of the Yankton Dakota Sioux and raised by her mother after her father abandoned their family. In 1884, when Zitkala-Ša was eight, Quaker missionaries came to their reservation and took several of the children to Wabash, Indiana to go to White’s Indiana Manual Labor Institute. In spite of her mother’s disapproval, Zitkala-Ša left for Indiana, where she was given the missionary name Gertrude Simmons. Zitkala-Ša attended the institute until 1887, then returning to the reservation for another three years. After her years at the institute, Zitkala-Ša expressed conflicting views of the experience, explaining that it both gave her tremendous joy in learning to read, write, and play the violin, but it also filled her with a tremendous sense of grief and pain at having to cut her hair and pray as a Quaker.

Despite her conflict, Zitkala-Ša returned to the institute after three years back with her mother, feeling that she no longer fit in with the tribe after being in Indiana. Zitkala-Ša returned to continue her studies and was hired as a music teacher by the institute, graduating in 1895. Upon receiving her diploma, Zitkala-Ša gave a speech in support of women’s rights. Zitkala-Ša then went to Earlham College in Richmond, Indiana on a scholarship. In her time at Earlham, Zitkala-Ša began to collect Native tribes’ stories and translate them into Latin and English. Unfortunately, in 1897, just six weeks before her graduation, Zitkala-Ša was forced to leave Earlham because of financial and health complications, moving to Boston to study violin at the New England Conservatory of Music. In 1899, Zitkala-Ša accepted a position as a music teacher at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania. During her time there, the school sent Zitkala-Ša back to her Yankton Reservation to recruit more students.

Upon her return to her reservation, Zitkala-Ša was appalled to find her family home in disrepair, widespread poverty, and white settlers occupying the land given to the Yankton Dakota people by the United States federal government. Upon her return to Carlisle, Zitkala-Ša began to write about Native American life, actively combating racist stereotypes of native peoples and writing scathing critiques of the boarding school system, which were published in English magazines with national readership, such as *Atlantic Monthly* and *Harper’s Monthly*. She was fired by the Carlisle Indian School in 1901 after writing a piece for *Harper’s Monthly* that detailed the deep loss of identity felt by a student at the school.

She then returned to her reservation to take care of her mother and collect stories for her book, *Old Indian Legends*, and worked in the local branch of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, where she met and married Captain Raymond Talefase Bonnin. The new family was assigned to the Uintah-Ouray Reservation in Utah, where they worked for fourteen years and had a son.

In 1910, Zitkala-Ša collaborated with a professor at Brigham Young University to write an opera titled *The Sun Dance Opera* based upon a sacred Sioux ritual banned by the federal government. Zitkala-Ša wrote the libretto and songs for the opera and was the first American Indian opera ever written.

Around the same time, Zitkala-Ša joined the Society of American Indians that existed to preserve traditional Native American culture while simultaneously lobbying for full American citizenship. Zitkala-Ša became the organization’s secretary, a position in which she corresponded with the BIA and became increasingly public in her critiques of the Bureau’s policies and practices focused on assimilation, such as abuses toward children who refused to pray as Christians. This outspoken criticism cost her husband his job in the BIA in 1916, at which point the family moved to Washington, DC, where Zitkala-Ša continued her work with the Society of American Indians. She began to lecture across the country in support of the preservation of Native American cultural and tribal identities while also firmly advocating for American citizenship and consequently the vote for Indigenous peoples. Zitkala-Ša argued that as the original inhabitants of this land, Native Americans needed representation in the government system.

In 1924, the federal government passed the federal Indian Citizenship Act, and while it granted American citizenship rights to all indigenous peoples, it did not guarantee the right to vote as states still held the power to determine who could vote.

In 1926, Zitkala-Ša and her husband founded the National Council of American Indians with Zitkala-Ša serving as the president until her death in 1938. The Council worked ardently to unite the tribes across the country to gain suffrage rights for all Native Americans. Zitkala-Ša also worked with white suffrage groups and was active in the General Federation of Women’s Clubs to serve as a public voice for diverse women, forming the Indian Welfare Committee of the Federation in 1924. In that same year, she ran a voter registration drive for Native Americans, encouraging them to participate in the democratic process to support policy that would be beneficial for Native Americans.

Also in 1924, Zitkala-Ša co-authored a piece titled “Oklahoma’s Poor Rich Indians: An Orgy of Graft and Exploitation of the Five Civilized Tribes- Legalized Robbery” that was incredibly influential in encouraging the government to investigate the exploitation and defrauding of Native American tribes by outside groups for access to their oil-rich lands that resulted in the passage of the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934.

Zitkala-Ša died in 1938, leaving behind an incredible legacy of fighting for Native American rights not only in the fight for suffrage, but in numerous different sectors. She is buried in Arlington National Cemetery in Washington, DC.

#### Sources

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