THE NOVEL AS A VEHICLE TO TELL THE STORY
OF THE MENOMINEE INDIANS

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What is to be done about the American Indian? The question has never been successfully answered. It has been a puzzle ever since Columbus reached the Caribbean and thought he had found India. The American Indian was an annoying problem to the early pioneers, to the westward settlers, to the United States Army, to every president and Congress from George Washington through Richard Nixon. The Indian question has been particularly troublesome in recent years with the take-over at Alcatraz, at Wounded Knee, and with the occupation of the Bureau of Indian Affairs in our nation's capital.

Wisconsin still puzzles over the Indian much as our forefathers did before we became a state. Currently the Menominee are in the headlines. Two decades ago they were prosperous, second only to the oil-rich Oklahoma Indians. Under pressure from Congress, they voted to terminate their reservation and become free citizens, supporting their own county. Today they are poverty ridden, and have successfully pleaded to again become wards of the federal government. The processes are now underway to disestablish Menominee County and to reestablish the Menominee Indian Reservation.

There are no easy answers to Indian problems, either among the Indians themselves, or in the Congress of the United States, Wisconsin, or anywhere.

The American Indian is still a generous natural resource. We made fortunes from him, giving him beads and brandy for his beaver. We traded cheap promises for good land. We put his profile on our pennies and our nickels, but let him own very few of them.

We are not finished merchandising Indians. We are now capitalizing our guilt, our compassion, our social consciousness in a flood of belated attention with varying motives. Jane Fonda and Marlon Brando have been typically loud in Indian causes. One wonders how much of this is truly for the Indian, how much for their own publicity.

Or take so many of the present books that seem to speak for the Indian. The accounts seem so stylized. Find an old Indian. Take
a tape recorder. Ply him with whiskey. Let him cry and sing his heart out. Then take your notes and your tapes, rewrite his story into the current pattern of popular guilt, twist his halting words into your ideology, into your sense of timing, into your telling phrase, your witticism, your creation of something intimate, something significant.

One becomes highly suspect of ghost-written accounts, as-told-to presentations, two-person authorships and their ability to bulge, perhaps rupture, the honest line between fiction and non-fiction. Such dubbed-in writing may appear to present solid and substantial fact which in reality may be highly manipulated and distorted by the views, motivations, aims and skills of the co-author. A strong compulsion to take such liberties may be based on present reader preference for non-fiction, and better sales, over true novels.

Nevertheless, the novel is a writing form of historic power and honesty. In the hands of a Charles Dickens, an Upton Sinclair, a John Steinbeck, its created characters become more alive than actual people. Social problems are shown in the glare of truth, and a great strength is born to help solve those problems.

The Menominee Indians today are a troubled minority people, protesting white dominance more intensely now than at any other time in history. In order to understand and appreciate the problems of the Menominee Indian today, one should know how he lived before the white people overwhelmed him. One should know his basic weaknesses in the presence of a different culture, his beliefs, his fears, how he handled his world when he alone walked it.

The Great Lakes Menominee, before the white man, were a small and prosperous tribe. They had wild rice, maple sugar, beaver, sturgeon, bear and deer, wild fowl and passenger pigeon, in such plenty that food was no problem. They had abundant time to contemplate the mysteries, to instruct their young in countless legends and traditions, and to perform the endless rituals that would please the spirits.

All Indians were dominated by spirits. Every rock, tree, bush, wind, animal, stream, lake, storm or fire was a spirit. Christian missionaries, recognizing no such spirits, seemed to the Indian to be hopelessly insensitive. Only when God was described as the Great Spirit, could spiritual communication begin.

In the dream fast, a young person would go alone for three or four days without food, water, or shelter until in his parched delirium a spirit would come to be guardian and confessor to him for the rest of life. Elation and sense of great power came.

No Indian tribe north of Mexico had any kind of fermented or distilled liquor. When they were first treated to it by the white
man, they felt the same elation, the same power, the same communion with all their spirits as their dream fast had given them. They quickly looked upon liquor as something good, something holy. With this extra appeal, in addition to the pleasure to the palate and the warming glow, Indians readily became alcoholic.

Indians before the white man came had no cows, goats, or sheep. Yet every child had milk for the first three years of his life. He nursed many months after he had learned to run and talk, but once he was weaned he never tasted milk again in all his life. Milk was for babies and only for babies. When the settlers came and brought their cows, and the Indians saw grown children and white adults drink milk they were horror stricken. To them it was a filthy abomination, a perversion of the worst kind. They turned their heads in utter disbelief and disgust.

White traders took Indian wives. They were a great help to the trader in getting him accepted among the tribes. It was a great honor for an Indian woman to be so chosen, and some became so proudly arrogant nobody could stand them.

But when the settlers came, as desperately as they needed women, no settler would ever take an Indian wife because they were no help at all.

They could not fry an egg.
They could not set a table.
They could not make a bed.
They could not milk a cow.

All primitive people become highly agitated by thunder and lightning. Thunder quickly becomes a part of their mythology. This was as true for the ancient Greeks and early Norsemen as for the American Indian, whose thunderbird is traditional with every tribe.

Even today, with all our modern sophistication, we too pay homage to thunder and its company. We pay high premiums for wind and hail insurance. Public utility companies and cities install lightning protection and keep emergency crews on standby during storms. We all keep our radios on during a tornado watch. There still are many farm families who get everybody up in the middle of the night to sit out a storm.

Try to imagine then, the fear that thunder and lightning could bring to an uninformed but imaginative Indian, crouching under bark slabs that leaked, that blew off with the wind, under an angry heaven striking at him with all the fury of the universe. His fear of lightning and thunder so overwhelmed him that he could find peace only through the mystic power of his medicine man. Only when the medicine man stripped naked and ran chanting all around
the camp were the thunderers appeased and the camp made safe again.

Over and over again, Indian spokesmen tell us that Indians are not interested in the white-man’s ambitions, or white economics, or white life styles, nor even white definitions of freedom or equality. The red man tells us that he does not want to imitate any other race, or be like any other people. He says he wants only to be an Indian and to be left alone so that he can be an Indian. Certainly one must accept that as a noble and a simple request. To be a brother to the deer and the bear, to be in accord with every tree and babbling brook, to walk as a natural creature of the woodland, to live in intimacy with all the spirits of the rocks and rains and winds, to live only with what Mother Nature sets before one, surely this is the ideal life.

This dream to go back fascinates, and is symbolic to young idealists, to the human-rights people, the ecologists, the nature scientists. It certainly must appeal to every thoughtful citizen who holds dear his own freedom.

All the natural riches of wholly Indian North America—vast beds of wild rice, maple groves bleeding rich sap, streams alive with sturgeon and beaver, the great plains black with buffalo, the woodland skies darkened with wild fowl, berries from spring to fall in every marsh and upland, grapes and nuts beyond all gathering. With all this boundless treasure, Nature working alone took more than three square miles of land to support each Indian.

If the Indians today could live primitively by themselves, it would be the highest priced living the earth has ever known. We would have to remove 197 million other Americans. We would have to take down our cities, bulldoze our highways back into the soil, abandon our farms, and return everything to the native prairies, marshes, and forests. Only then could an Indian live his ideal life as an Indian.

This is the dilemma the Indian creates for himself and for us. This is why the Indian himself makes it so difficult to help him. This is why, after four hundred years of trying we still cannot answer the Indian question either to his satisfaction or to ours.

Nature can renew, nature can replenish, nature can go on no matter how violently she has been insulted, but nature cannot go backward. Only in fiction, only in make-believe, can we go back to relive the days that once were.

GO AWAY THUNDER, a novel published in 1972, is a tale of the Menominee Indians many generations before Columbus. It is wholly sympathetic to the Indian viewpoint. As fiction, it can go
back, it can re-live the times when the Menominee were the giants of the Great Lakes woodland.

Through nearly three hundred years of the fur trade, the woodland Menominee homeland on the north and west shores of Lake Michigan remained undisturbed, its culture intact. Once the European demand for beaver hats declined there was no economic reason whatsoever for a white man to stay in Menominee country.

Nothing much was asked of the Menominee until lumbermen took notice of the finest stand of white pine the world has ever seen on their ancestral lands. American enterprise, needing lumber and lots of it for expanding America, easily negotiated treaties to take the Menominee land. By that time we had already passed the middle of the 19th century, our nation was approaching the astonishing age of one hundred years, and we were affluent enough to have money to put into carefully detailed studies of the people who were here before we were.

The Bureau of American Ethnology as a part of the Smithsonian Institution began a series of cultural studies of Indian tribes, a series of studies continuing for many decades. The remarkable Menominee, essentially living the same as their ancestors long before the first white man in America, were studied and documented, their chiefs and medicine men explaining their traditions and values.

From these detailed ethnic studies, from the much earlier explorers' and traders' notes, from the early missionary documents it is possible to piece together a story of Menominee life when Indians alone occupied the northern woodland. With this authentic documentation, GO AWAY THUNDER was written. It recreates one year of early Menominee tribal life in the long long parade of mankind. The title, GO AWAY THUNDER expresses an awe, a fear, a plea to the unknown, a prayer to the mysteries by the primitive American Indian. GO AWAY THUNDER is also a symbolic cry toward the coming of the white man, the most awesome thunder of all.

This has been my work to find out about earlier Indians for a better understanding of the Indian of today. I have now completed, as a following novel entitled BEAVER, BRANDY, BEADS AND BELLS, the amazing story of their first contact with white civilization.

Later, after much more research, I intend to put into a third Menominee novel the continuing conflict between these proud Indians and white culture today.