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Illinois' First
Native American
Student





Photo courtesy of University of Illinois Archives

Carlos "Wassaja" Montezuma

Torn Between Two Worlds: The Life Of Carlos Montezuma

By John Franch

Carlos Montezuma would never forget that terrible night in October 1871 when his life was forever altered. Around 3 o'clock in the morning, a band of Pima Indians descended upon a sleeping Yavapai camp pitched near the summit of Iron Mountain in eastern Arizona Territory. The Pima warriors slaughtered dozens of Yavapai Indians and captured 13 children, including Wassaja, a boy about 5 years of age. Wassaja didn't know it then, but the course of his life had been radically changed. Renamed Carlos Montezuma by the man who bought his freedom, the youth would go East, graduate in 1884 from the Illinois Industrial University (precursor to the University of Illinois), become a Chicago doctor and gain a name as a champion of American Indian rights. Finally, unable to resist the call of his old existence, he would return to the home of his people, his life ending where it had begun.

Following his capture, young Wassaja (pronounced Wah-SAH-jah) was hauled on horseback across the desert to Adamsville, a dusty outpost about 35 miles southwest of Iron Mountain. Here he encountered the first white man he had ever seen – Carlo Gentile, an Italian-born photographer. “I did not think [his skin] was a pretty color, and was afraid of him,” Montezuma later recalled. He was wary of Gentile in part because of the photographer's camera, which, with its protruding lens and heavy wooden tripod, looked like a cannon to the boy. Such fears proved to be unfounded. Instead of harming him, Gentile purchased Wassaja from his Pima captors, paying 30 silver dollars.

Gentile is something of a mystery, with much of his career rather obscure. However, at least one thing about him is abundantly clear: Gentile suffered from a serious case of wanderlust. During the previous decade of the 1860s, Gentile had traveled through Washington, Oregon and British Columbia, visiting various Indian tribes and prospecting. In 1867 the adventure-seeker headed off to Arizona Territory where, he noted, “things were more lively.” Gentile wasn't kidding. Gold had been discovered recently in the lands occupied by the Yavapai Indians. U.S. cavalrymen protected the invading gold miners with the aid of Pima warriors, warriors like the ones who had nabbed Wassaja.

Gentile never struck gold in Arizona, but he did find an Indian boy. After changing Wassaja's name, the photographer crisscrossed the country with his new charge. Late in 1872, the pair settled in Chicago, a city still recovering from the great fire of the year before. William “Buffalo Bill” Cody happened to be in town, starring in his first stage production, “Red Deviltry As It Is!” and somehow Gentile made the acquaintance of the soon-to-be legendary showman. Before long, Carlos – billed as the “Apache son of Cochise” – was performing in Cody's play. Throughout much of his life, Montezuma would mistakenly believe that he was indeed an Apache.

Gentile's association with Cody's show ended in 1873, and Carlos began going to school. By 1875, the youth had made great strides in his studies and could speak English fluently. “Monty is rather superior in aptness and intelligence to boys of his age, and is, apparently, thoroughly civilized,” a Chicago Tribune reporter noted in a profile of Gentile's “protégé” from that year.

A small article adjacent to the Tribune feature on Carlos reported that U.S. President Grant had taken “decisive steps” to open up the Black Hills to white settlement. This story, buried in the back pages of the newspaper, would have momentous consequences. Grant's decision sparked strong opposition from the Sioux Indians, who considered the Black Hills to be sacred land. In a little more than a year, Gen. George Armstrong Custer and more than 200 members of his 7th Cavalry would fall at the hands of the Sioux and Northern Cheyenne near the banks of the Little Bighorn River; not long after that, the last of the Sioux would be confined to reservations. The Yavapai, Montezuma's own people, were removed to a reservation in 1875.

During these eventful years, Carlos attended schools in Galesburg and Brooklyn, N.Y. Hoping to provide a more stable home life for the youth, with whom he was now living in Boston, Gentile entrusted Carlos to the care of George Ingalls of the American Baptist Home Mission Society, headquartered in New York City. In a letter, Ingalls outlined his ambitions for the young boy: “I want Montezuma to become, first, a Christian and then to be a Physician and with a good education and love of Christ in his heart, to go back to his people and labor for their good as a Christian or Missionary physician.”

Ingalls placed Carlos in the home of William Stedman, pastor of the First Baptist Church in Urbana. Working under the auspices of the YMCA at the Illinois Industrial University, a team

Indian culture and traditions. He strictly forbade the use of native languages in the school, considering the English tongue to be a strong “civilizing” force.

For much of his life, Montezuma would be an ardent supporter of Pratt and his policies. As early as 1888, Montezuma delivered an address, “The Indian of Tomorrow,” that dramatically demonstrated his pro-Pratt sentiments. “The Indian of tomorrow,” Montezuma declared in the speech, “will be, not an unfortunate savage, clothed in the accouterments of his former benighted condition, but the Indian redeemed, transformed, and raised to the plane of manhood.”

Montezuma received his medical degree in March 1889. According to his biographer, Leon Speroff, Montezuma barely missed out on being the first American Indian physician in the United States. That honor belongs to Susan La Flesche, who graduated from medical school just two weeks before Montezuma.

Following a brief attempt to set up a private medical practice in Chicago, the young doctor decided to work for the federal government’s Bureau of Indian Affairs. During a four-year period, he worked on reservations in North Dakota, Nevada and Washington. The experience was disheartening and strengthened Montezuma’s belief that reservations should be abolished. He would later condemn the reservation in unsparring terms as a “demoralizing prison, a barrier to enlightenment, a promoter of idleness, gamblers, paupers, and ruin.” Perhaps most discouraging to Montezuma, many of the reservation Indians never accepted him, viewing him instead as a white man. Montezuma eventually expressed his frustrations in a letter. “I dislike this lonely business,” he wrote. “It may look nice to others, but it is hard on me who likes civilization.”

In 1893 Montezuma escaped from reservation life and returned to “civilization,” taking a job as a physician at Pratt’s Carlisle Indian Industrial School. His enormous ambitions unsatisfied at Carlisle, Montezuma soon resolved to return to Chicago and restart his private medical practice. He was a man on a mission. “I resigned from the Indian Service to prove that I, a lone Indian born in savagery, could make my way by myself, unaided, in the world alongside white men,” Montezuma explained. “And if I could, so could my people.”



C. Gentile. Photograph Owl Club Chicago.

Carlos Montezuma was rescued from slavery when Carlo Gentile, above, purchased the boy for \$30 from his Pima Indian captors and guided him to success in the white man's world.

Photo courtesy of Chicago History Museum, ICHM-39202, Mosher

Realizing his aims to a degree, he managed to establish a moderately successful private practice in Chicago. For much of Montezuma’s medical career, he operated out of two offices – one on the South Side and the other in the city’s bustling heart. Though never wealthy, Montezuma lived comfortably until 1914, when his finances began to slip. In Speroff’s view, Montezuma could have become rich had he patented a special salve of his own creation. A similar mixture of Vaseline and menthol boasts a familiar trade name: Vicks VapoRub.

With his professional life nicely progressing, Montezuma, by now in his mid-30s, began to think of marriage. In 1901 he became engaged to Gertrude Simmons, a Yankton Sioux writer. Their relationship proved to be a stormy one.

Zitkala-Sa (Sioux for “Red Bird”), the name Simmons had given herself at age 24, was a

fiercely independent woman. “I fear no man – some times I think I do not fear God,” she told Montezuma. Zitkala-Sa was also immensely proud of her American Indian heritage. In a well-known essay for *The Atlantic Monthly*, she explained to the world “Why I Am A Pagan.” Unlike Montezuma, Zitkala-Sa believed that American Indian culture had continuing value and was worth preserving. She even was harshly critical of Pratt, Montezuma’s idol. In Zitkala-Sa’s view, schools like Pratt’s Carlisle, instead of civilizing their students, were in fact turning them into “drudges.” “I prefer to be stone-dead rather than living-dead,” she informed her fiancé.

Philosophical differences led to the perhaps inevitable breakup of their relationship. Zitkala-Sa was planning to return to her mother’s South Dakota reservation and wanted Montezuma to join her. He, however, wasn’t willing to make the move, preferring to be “a missionary among the whites.” The correspondence between the two grew increasingly bitter until October 1901 when Zitkala-Sa ended the engagement. “I can always respect you as a friend – but never more,” she wrote him. “Let me wish you success in your chosen world and work. Mine lay in places ‘barren and foreign’ to your acquired taste. Goodby, Z.” In 1913 Montezuma married Marie Keller, a Romanian native 22 years his junior.

Montezuma and Zitkala-Sa would eventually reconcile and become allies in a pioneering new organization, the Society of American Indians. In 1911 he helped found this group, which was dedicated to the advancement of the American Indian.

Montezuma used the Society as a platform to voice his long-

of teachers instructed the youth in history, geography, arithmetic and Latin. At one point, taking a break from serious studies, Latin instructor F.C. Hall decided to educate Carlos in the intricacies of checkers. Hall fancied himself an expert at the game. However, after losing three matches in a row to the boy, the checkers “expert” learned an unexpected lesson of his own.

After spending two years in the preparatory school of the Illinois Industrial University, Montezuma enrolled in the University itself. The school (renamed the University of Illinois in 1884) was a far cry from the “Big U” of the present day, having some 350 students, just 30 faculty members and roughly half a dozen buildings in 1882. The students and the administration were locked at the time in a bitter battle pitting “the ideal of discipline” against “the ideal of freedom,” in University historian Winton Solberg’s words. Winning major victories in the struggle, the students would eventually force the ouster of two successive regents – John M. Gregory in 1880 and Selim Peabody in 1891.

Montezuma gained a measure of acceptance in Urbana. Joining the Adelpic Literary Society, Monte (as he was nicknamed) overcame an initial “tendency to embarrassment” and soon won acclaim for his oratorical prowess, for his “mastery of a tongue not by any means a mother one to him,” according to the literary society’s records. In May 1883 he delivered a speech on “Indian’s Bravery,” one of the high points of his college days. “The most vivid, pathetic, and beautiful picture ever painted in our Hall, was ‘Monto’s’ [sic] in his description of the Indians in America before the arrival of the white man,” the student newspaper gushed. Capping his University career, Monte was elected president



Carlos Montezuma, the first American Indian graduate of the University of Illinois, is shown in this 1874 photo at age 8.

Photo courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution, National Anthropological Archives

of the class of 1884. The University of Illinois seems to have occupied a special place in his heart. In later years, even when his finances were shaky, the first American Indian graduate of the University made sure to pay his membership dues to the Chicago Illini Club and the University of Illinois Alumni Association.

However, the youth’s time in Urbana was not always pleasant. According to Montezuma, his Baptist pastor host was warned that “he had better look out for that Indian”; that he was liable to be killed by him at any time; that he must not forget that an Indian was an Indian and could never be trusted.”

Shortly after graduating at age 18 from the Illinois Industrial University in June 1884 with a bachelor’s degree in chemistry,

Montezuma entered the Chicago Medical College, precursor to the Northwestern University School of Medicine. While in medical school, he came under the influence of Brig. Gen. Richard Henry Pratt. A former cavalry officer, Pratt objected to the views of people like Gen. Philip Sheridan, who once famously remarked that “the only good Indians I ever saw were dead.” Pratt advocated the total assimilation of American Indians into white society. In 1879 he opened the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania. The school’s objective, in Pratt’s words, was “to kill the Indian and save the man.” In furtherance of this aim, Carlisle students were taught practical skills and subjected to harsh military discipline. Their hair was cut severely short, and they were forced to wear military uniforms. Pratt had no use for American



Photo courtesy of University of Illinois Archives

◀ Carlos Montezuma poses with his wife, Marie Keller, whom he called “Dovie” in his letters. The photo was taken around 1920. The Rev. William Stedman, with whom Montezuma lived during his college days at Illinois, presided at the couple’s marriage in 1913.

held beliefs. Speaking at the organization's 1912 conference, he advocated "the entire wiping out of the reservation system" as "the only true solution of the so-called 'Indian problem.'" A few years later, in the same forum, he delivered his most famous speech – "Let My People Go" – urging the immediate abolition of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. This particular cause would consume the remaining years of Montezuma's life. In 1916, he began publishing *Wassaja*, a monthly newsletter to which he gave his boyhood name. The publication was devoted to the elimination of the bureau. Critics considered Montezuma's stance to be unrealistic and radical, especially since he failed to offer any alternatives.

Yet, despite Montezuma's professed hostility toward reservations and American Indian culture, he increasingly began to reconnect with his Indian roots. Starting in 1901, Montezuma made regular pilgrimages to Arizona, retracing the route of his Pima Indian captors. The experiences reinvigorated him. During Montezuma's first return trip to Arizona, he confessed in a letter to Pratt, "I am having the real dream of my life."

By 1920, he had decided to take the dramatic step of enrolling in a tribe. Still believing that he was an Apache, Montezuma petitioned the hated Bureau of Indian Affairs to make him a member of the San Carlos Reservation, the homeland of the Apache. "I belong there," he told his lawyer in explanation. Montezuma's application, though, was rejected after an investigation determined that he was in fact not an Apache. The news

stunned him: "If I am not an Apache, there is [sic] no such Indians as Apache Indians," he asserted. Montezuma's sense of self had been built on a perceived identity as being a part of that tribe, popularly known as fierce and indomitable warriors. The Yavapai, on the other hand, did not possess a well-defined public image.

Montezuma ultimately accepted the fact that he was a Yavapai (also known as the Mojave Apache). Terminally ill with tuberculosis, he traveled late in 1922 to the Yavapai's Fort McDowell Reservation, hoping to die among his people. Montezuma had spent more than a decade of his life fighting for the land and water rights of the Yavapai and, as a result, was welcomed by them with open arms.

Montezuma died on Jan. 31, 1923. His tombstone in the Fort McDowell military cemetery includes both of his names ("Wassaja" and "Carlos Montezuma M.D.") and the description "Mohave Apache Indian."

After 52 years, *Wassaja* had finally come home.

Franch 89 com is a freelance writer based in Champaign and the author of *Robber Baron: The Life of Charles Tyson Yerkes* (University of Illinois Press, 2006).

