

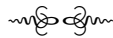
[COMMONPLACE LECTURES]

Roads, Interstates,
and the Oregon Trail
*The Urban Indian Experience
in the Rural West*



A LECTURE BY
Mark Trahant

commonplace lectures : connecting ideas and communities



commonplace (*L. locus communis*) : a general theme
or argument applicable to many particular cases;
a common or ordinary topic.

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At Liberty: A Town's History and a Theater's Story,
Astoria, the Liberty Theater, February 24, 2006

DONALD SNOW

'Round the Next Bend: Pendleton, Walla Walla, and the
Transformation of the Rural West,
Pendleton, Hamley's Western Store, May 19, 2006

MOTT GREENE

The Lab and the Flag:
Science, Democracy, and a New Worldview
Portland, Jean Vollum Natural Capital Center, October 20, 2006

RANDY GRAGG

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SUSAN W. HARDWICK

Far from Home: Slavic Refugees and the Changing Face of Oregon
Salem, Willamette University, May 19, 2007

MARK TRAHANT

Roads, Interstates, and the Oregon Trail:
The Urban Indian Experience in the Rural West
Portland, Portland State University, October 26, 2007

*Roads, Interstates, and the Oregon Trail:
The Urban Indian Experience in the Rural West by Mark
Trahan. A lecture delivered at the Native American
Student & Community Center on the campus of
Portland State University in Portland, Oregon,
on October 26, 2007.*



I like to think of myself as a child of the American West. The West I know is about roads, stories, and extraordinary beauty. It is also about independence, help from the government, and intense competition over natural resources. It's a West where our perception of its landscape is rural, even when more of us live in cities here than in any other part of the United States. It's a West where we've learned to create universal health care—only to ignore its real costs.

I am a metaphor for this West. I grew up on the road. My parents married when they were teenagers and split a couple of years later. I was two when my mother moved to California. Soon after I began shuttling back and forth on Interstate 80 and Interstate 15 from the Bay Area to the Fort Hall Indian Reservation in Idaho. I learned to be at ease on a long drive. I still am. Fifty-thousand turns of the odometer are an average year on my vehicles. And why not? What we think of as the West is defined by great distances wired together by interstates. Most people in Oregon and Washington live near I-5. Most of the rest can be reached by connecting to I-84 or I-90. This is not new. The Northwest has always been more diverse than its image. Too often we think of one-way trails, paths left by migrants from the east. Shoshone and Bannock people even mocked this idea a long time ago by calling the Oregon Trail, "The Holy Road." But these roads have always crisscrossed: Plains tribes meeting Plateau people; Russians coming from the North; Latin Americans from the South, and Asians venturing across the Pacific.

This is a region with centuries and centuries of movement along routes that we now call freeways. Only three of those centuries ago the Shoshone trade route stretched from Oregon to Oklahoma, from Canada to Mexico. As I suggested in my essay for the book *Lewis & Clark Through Indian Eyes*, I think one of the great misobservations by the Corps of Discovery was about Shoshone mobility and trade.

That, too, should have been a narrative about roads. The Corps encountered Shoshones at Idaho's Lemhi Pass. That very location was a crossroads long before

Lewis and Clark. Now, of course, it is a road that has been transformed into a historical marker. Tourists drive up that narrow lane to the pass where they take a few pictures, camp, or just look around.

Then, except for the destination, this is what we do when we travel on a road. We tell a story about where we've been and where we are going. These are stories in competition—my Lewis and Clark narrative fits into this century because ... you fill in the blank.

But in the Lewis and Clark narrative, the blank was filled in for Indian people and that story became accepted, even when the captains were wrong. In the journals, Meriwether Lewis's observation about Shoshone poverty is accepted as truth. He wrote down what he saw that day. It was his only frame of reference, a point of view limited in scope. But the funny thing to me is that he also noted, but did not realize, another version of that same truth. "The tippet of the Snake Indians is the most elegant piece of Indian dress I ever saw," Lewis wrote. "The neck or collar of this is formed of a strip of dressed otter skin with the fur ... and has the appearance of a short cloak and is really handsome." The four hundred "fine" horses owned by the band impressed several men in the Corps. Lewis recognized Spanish brands on the animals. "I also saw

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a bridle bit of Spanish manufactory, and sundry other articles which I have no doubt were obtained from the same source,” he writes in the journal. But then, in the very next sentence, Lewis reaches the polar conclusion of extreme poverty. Did he ever wonder about this contradiction? Lewis described articles that could have been part of a Shoshone trading system, such as Spanish-manufactured bits and “fine” horses. These guys should have figured out their mistake on their own. When the Corps later bargained for horses, well, they went up against better traders. They bought more than two-dozen horses from the band for the next part of their journey. Nearly all of the horses had sore backs. That is a good story to tell. I also want to mention another book, *The First Oregonians*. If you haven’t picked up a copy, I encourage you to do so. It’s a compelling history that is essential if you really want to understand where you live. In the opening essay, Elizabeth Woody writes:

Indigenous peoples from other places also live here in Oregon. There are Dine, Lakota, Pueblo, Yaqui and Hawaiian peoples, among many others. If you were to list all the tribes and indigenous people here it would include peoples from most of the North and Central American continent and the Pacific Rim. In the urban areas, where 89 percent of Oregon’s native people live, you may also experience another type of native identity some have called pan-Indianism.

Woody says one reason for this is the mixing of tribal cultures through the boarding school experience, federal relocation, and just living in an urban environment.

She goes on to write, “Portland boasts one of the first urban Indian centers in the nation, and the same energetic leadership started the first alcohol and drug treatment center in the country to use Native American healing practices, such as the sweat lodge.”

It's easy to think of the Native American urban experience as a numbers story. Portland has some 38,000 native residents. And, as Elizabeth Woody cited, 89 percent of Oregon's Native population live in a city. Nationally, nearly two-thirds of all American Indians and Alaskan Natives reside in urban or suburban centers. There are a variety of reasons—some historic, such as the Bureau of Indian Affairs's relocation plan, others economic or career-related.

The narrative often told about this urban population is a gloomy one. Just a few months ago, *Willamette Week* wrote about the subject, saying that urban Indians are "Portland's invisible minority."

Let me read you the story's lede: "On Margo Guajardo's right arm is the tattoo 'N8ive Pride.' It may be callous to ask what she has to be proud of. Callous, but not entirely inappropriate."

The story paints a picture with numbers about the bleak conditions for urban Indian populations. One dark statistic after another: more than 13 percent of all foster-care cases in the state in 2005 involved Native American youth, although Native American children made up only 1.3 percent of Oregon's under-18 population; highest rates of suicide, binge drinking, and poverty of any minority group in the United States.

The *Willamette Week* story goes on to say:

Still, the plight of Native Americans may be one of the untold secrets of the "minority beat" in modern-day journalism. Rarely does one read about members of the 300 tribes represented in Portland. Even rarer is a discussion of what is causing Native Americans to fall behind—or what is preventing them from advancing. What does remain in the news is talk of the nine Indian casinos in Oregon. And although profits at the nine casinos vary widely from tribe to tribe and not every tribal member in Oregon is entitled to money from those operations,

many people continue to assume that the benefits of Indian gambling are spread among all Native Americans.

Let me just say this: I don't want to be too hard on *Willamette Week*. What they wrote is absolutely true. But they missed the story. It's flat. It only captures one slice of the urban Indian experience. It's missing context. It's like the Lewis and Clark narrative, filling in the blank for us. The *Willamette Week* paragraph, to me, captures the master narrative brilliantly. Poverty in the city, gambling wealth at home. Geez. What a great story.

Only a decade ago the story about life on an Indian reservation was just as lifeless. I remember reading stories about Fort Hall and wondered how it could be the same place where I lived. I knew that things were tough. But, at the same time, it was a great place to grow up. I still love it there and own the house that I grew up in.

A decade ago there were two master narratives at work: Indian Country's poverty or the intense competition for natural resources—salmon in this part of the world or oil, coal, and gas in other regions. Those two narratives defined Indian Country until gaming came along. Then, a new narrative developed, one of success, wealth, and political power.

Of course gaming has not erased every problem facing Indian Country. But it has done some good things. But what bugs me is that there were stories of tribal success and even wealth before the media wrote about gaming. (I am careful not to say before gaming because the accurate context is that gaming in Indian Country has a ten-thousand-year history.) The story was always more complicated than the headlines.

And so it is with the urban Indian experience. We need narratives about those who move to the city for opportunity. These are people who do their jobs, raise their children, and often maintain a vibrant connection with their culture and community back on the reservation.

I think there's a good case to be made for the city as one source of intellectual capital for Indian Country. Two current examples involve sports and universities. The World Series is big news in the Navajo Nation. Oregon State's Jacoby Ellsbury has had a great season, moving from the minor leagues right into the majors, and became the first Navajo in the World Series. "Every time a Native American accomplishes such a thing, it draws attention from the youth because it demonstrates it can be done," the *Navajo Times'* editor told the *Christian Science Monitor*. In fact, next week anyone who wants can go to Taco Bell and get a free taco courtesy of Ellsbury's stolen base in the World Series. It's almost like a "feed" back home.

And last week, I attended a reception to honor the new president of Antioch University in Seattle. Cassandra Manuelito-Kerkvilet, also formerly of Corvallis, and another Navajo, became, most likely, the first Native American woman to lead a non-tribal college. The reception became a gathering place for the dozens of urban Native American leaders in the community: bank vice presidents, attorneys, professors, nonprofit managers—in short, a broad array of professionals, including Senator Claudia Kauffman, a Democrat representing the suburb of Kent, Washington.

But often, these kinds of success stories for urban Indians begin on the road. My grandfather's cousin, a man by the name of George Lavatta (I always called him uncle, even though that's not quite correct), was one of those success stories. My uncle was ambitious. He had returned to Fort Hall from Carlisle Indian School and was looking for work. His mother gave him \$10—her entire savings—and said go find a job and a place to live. He went to Pocatello and found a job as a roustabout at the Union Pacific rail yards. Three days after he started, the yard superintendent was furious. He wanted to know how a "lazy Indian" had managed to get a job. Lavatta said that was wrong. He asked to work until the end of the week—he wanted a chance. The superintendent agreed, and Lavatta was hired into a regular position.

That was 1916. Lavatta worked hard and the railroad noticed. Ten years later my uncle was a full-time mechanic; he had been elected secretary of the Oregon Short Line and Union Pacific shops and was honored with special recognition for meritorious service. He moved to Portland in 1926 to work as an Adviser General, a special assistant to the railroad's president and "the overseer of Indian employment." The railroad said at the time, "The

position was created in the hope that George Lavatta would fill it."

But first Lavatta had a question: "If a qualified, properly trained Indian applies for a job, will you give him the same chance as a white man?" The answer must have been affirmative because my uncle sent a telegram to Union Pacific saying he'd be ready for work the next day.

Lavatta moved to Portland for work—a common reason for many Indian people to move to cities. This became his home—he never again returned to Fort Hall as a resident, but often traveled back and forth and was always a presence. He remained a part of the tribal community—returning to talk to the tribal council, speak to students or family. The Fort Hall Business Council—the tribal governing body—often recognized Lavatta for his continued effort, once passing a resolution that said every honor directed at George was a recognition of the larger tribe, too.

Lavatta used Portland as a base for all sorts of organizations that made the world better for people back on the reservation. He helped create everything from an Indian hall of fame to the National Indian Council on Aging. He was an original founder of the National Congress of American Indians. He was also active with Portland local groups, too. "Here in Portland I was fighting to have a representative on their

[Helen Peterson] said the strongest argument that the tribes had was their historical ties to a place. "Tribal survival . . . can't happen without a land base."

Women's Welfare Council Bureau. I wanted Indians to represent Indians," he said.

The point of my story is that the city is a source of intellectual capital that flows back and forth to Indian Country. Though I used my relative as the example, it could just as well have been many others. Another person whose story parallels George's in many ways is the long-time director of the National Congress of American Indians, Helen Peterson. I first met Helen when I was a teenager. I really didn't know much about her, except that she worked for the Bureau of Indian Affairs and that she was always, always asking questions.

"What are you doing at that newspaper?" she'd ask, followed by "What are you writing? Who did you talk to? What are you doing next?"

She was eighty-four when she died in a Portland nursing home. Probably because I was always surrounded by her questions, I had no idea how many answers Peterson had discovered. She ought to be thought of as one of the most important American Indian women of this century. But that sort of statement would have made her uncomfortable—and she likely would have greeted it with more questions.

Helen Louise White Peterson started her career with an unbelievable question, one pondering the survival of Indian tribes. Starting in the late 1940s, Senator Arthur Watkins (R-Utah) led a national movement to "free the Indians" by removing the political structure at both the tribal and federal levels. Called termination, this plan essentially broke the promises made by the United States in treaties by eliminating reservations. Indians would be "terminated" by definition.

Peterson organized a modern lobby to counter Watkins. She and a friend traveled across the country in a late-model Chevy, building support and contacts in Indian country. Then she returned to Washington, D.C., to fight Watkins' termination movement in Congress.

Author Thomas Cowger, in his book, *The National Congress of American Indians: The Founding Years*, says that Watkins dominated the

proceedings and “bullied the witnesses by eliciting only the assimilationist responses he was interested in hearing; he even interrupted testimony to insert his own beliefs.” Congress approved the termination of six tribes.

But that was only round one. Peterson spent the next few months working to stop another bill that would have resulted in more terminations. “Hard work and \$425 worth of telephone calls to tribal chairmen to get them to send wires to their congressmen did the trick—and it happened right before our eyes,” Peterson said. She said the strongest argument that the tribes had was their historical ties to a place. “Tribal survival . . . can’t happen without a land base.”

That sort of thinking, taking reservation ideas and applying them to urban issues, was a huge part of the 1970s. In cities across the country, people organized and formed Indian centers, clinics, and other gathering institutions.

In Seattle, the land-base idea was taken literally. On March 8, 1970, nearly one hundred people invaded the Army’s Fort Lawton. This was an urban Indian movement—the United Indians of All Tribes. At first, some thought it was a poor imitation of the takeover of Alcatraz. But one of the participants, Bernie Whitebear, was clear. “A great deal of people aren’t aware that this is a serious effort we’re making,” he told my newspaper, the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*. “We see Fort Lawton as a shining light—a chance for us to come into our own. The general contention is that the Indians would run down the land, but the truth is we’ve never had the chance to administer our own programs.”

Today, this former Army property, set in Discovery Park, is now an urban version of Indian Country; it’s almost a reservation in a city setting. At Daybreak Star, you can smell salmon cooking, or hear singing and the jingles of dance, or see the children at school as they hear wisdom from a variety of Northwest tribal cultures and learn who they are. Daybreak Star remains sovereign territory, if not in law, then certainly in spirit.

About the same time, something else was going on in Seattle.

Bernie Whitebear took Abe Bergman, a pediatrician, for a tour of an urban Indian clinic. Bergman was interested in the serious health status of American Indian children. “He showed me around and, of course, it was a terrible place, physically a dump. And they were struggling. They had volunteer doctors and dentists,” Bergman recalled. He asked what sort of help was available from the U.S. Indian Health Service—only to learn that program was designed only for Indians living on reservations.

Bergman had worked with Senators Warren Magnuson and Henry Jackson on another piece of legislation involving health care, so he went to Washington to see if something could be done to help American Indians.

Now there’s a new kind of road, one that doesn’t rely on asphalt and motorized vehicles: the Internet.

Bergman visited with Jackson and asked what he knew about the Seattle clinic. As it turned out, not much. But Senator Jackson had been a witness to the success of Daybreak Star. He knew Bernie Whitebear and immediately agreed to help.

The timing was ideal. President Nixon had recently rejected the policy of termination. What’s more, Jackson, who had been a supporter of termination, had reversed his own position. He hired Forrest Gerard, a Blackfeet tribal member from Montana, as his representative on the Interior Committee.

This was a remarkable partnership: a Republican president and a powerful Democratic committee chairman working together on American Indian issues.

Bergman found a receptive audience but was told by Gerard that it would be more strategic to push for a comprehensive approach, a bill that worked to improve health for all American Indians—those on reservations and those who lived in cities.

“I am signing S. 522, the Indian Health Care Improvement Act,” President Gerald R. Ford wrote on October 1, 1976. “This bill is not without its faults, but after personal review, I have decided that the well-documented needs for improvement in Indian health manpower, services and facilities outweigh the defects in the bill. ... I am signing this bill because of my own conviction that our first Americans should not be last in opportunity.”

“Not without its faults” meant that the bureaucracy was hoping the president would veto the act. A veto message was even placed before the president for his signature: this was a Nixon program and some balked at its cost of \$1.6 billion over five years. But at the White House, Brad Patterson, who had worked on many of those issues with Nixon, told the president that this bill was important. “Our counterarguments won the day; the legislation was signed by President Ford.”

Three decades later this issue remains hot. While urban Indian health care remains substandard, the Bush administration has attempted to zero out funding for clinics. Indeed, the Justice Department raised numerous objections to the reauthorization of the Indian Health Care Improvement Act. This act could be another topic—call it unfinished business. The Senate has promised to move this reauthorization forward by the end of the session.

Now there’s a new kind of road, one that doesn’t rely on asphalt and motorized vehicles: the Internet. More and more, young urban Indians are using technology to make connections, build networks, and advocate for Indian people.

Although I’m not exactly the right demographic, I have a MySpace page—I created it as an experiment leading up to “Prez on the Rez,” a presidential town hall that I moderated at the Morongo Band of Mission Indians’ reservation in California earlier this year. One of my “friends” on the site is “Indigenous Flygirl.” Perhaps, at first, the page looks ordinary. She’s ninety-nine years old (a common MySpace age). She says,

"I'm thinking of cheese fries. Yummy." Pretty much what you would expect on MySpace. But then she has extraordinary photographs, capturing urban life. She lists nearly 4,400 friends and some 4,100 comments posted to her home page. This year alone she's had 62,000 page views. ("Who is looking at that?" she asked.)

Flygirl's real name is Alyssa Macy. She's from Warm Springs but lives in Milwaukie (and, like Ellsbury, went to Madras High School). Here is what she writes about herself:

My parents met through their work with the American Indian Movement in the early '70s. They instilled in me a strong understanding of who I am as an Indigenous woman and of my people and our traditions. They encouraged me to pursue my education and fed my creative appetite through photography, art, and music. Growing up on the rez taught me how to survive in a tough world, to laugh until your sides hurt, and to make just about anything out of commodities. These lessons, the grace of the Creator, and tenacity have carried me to where I am today.

MySpace is not just where Indigenous Flygirl plays, but it's where she organizes people, specifically young people. Her mediums are the Web and hip-hop.

About a dozen years ago, while living in Phoenix, Macy was helping organize an urban Indian summit. A group started a listserv to communicate with each other. But much of the time the same information was shipped over and over, to the same people. Macy says she needed a way to expand her network.

"I signed up for MySpace in February of 2005. It was never meant to be anything more than a way to stay in touch with friends, house my photography, and to talk with the reservation community," she said.

But it was the network that she had been looking for. Macy said, “The nice thing about MySpace is that I would send something out and people would respond to it. People are thinking in terms of what you are thinking.”

Macy started a marketing effort for hip-hop on MySpace and that led to a fundraising campaign for the Native American Rights Fund (NARF). That effort reached a whole new audience—at an Indian market in Santa Fe there was a hip-hop shop, playing a NARF song. These young people thought NARF was “cool.” It was branded through hip-hop. Macy says the effort worked well: “We exceeded our fundraising goals. By a lot.”

What I really like about both Macy and her MySpace page is her sense of responsibility. She knows that young people here in Oregon are looking at her pages and what she says about herself. “You put yourself out in a public way,” she says. “So do something good. Talk about the challenges in a good way—or you can put out a lot of garbage. I choose to not do that.” This is an urban-reservation community without walls. Or, to use my opening metaphor, the land with new roads.

I want to wrap this up by tying together two ideas about the urban experience. I mentioned a newspaper account about the really tough conditions for a lot of Native Americans who live in cities. And, conversely, I talked about people who’ve used the city as a base or found success. What I would like to do now is put those two ideas into one and talk about the future.

This country is going through a remarkable shift in terms of its population. The median age of the American worker is rising—from 38.7 in 1998 to 40.7 in 2008. We’re getting older and graying. But Indian Country—both on the reservation and in the city—is not like that. The median age of American Indians is about thirty. That seems to me a critical opportunity. The Indian community can help this country navigate through the graying of the population. But for that to work there has to be both recognition and investment. I’ve talked a lot about

stories tonight—so let me end with a few numbers.

Next year, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, this country will need to hire 519,000 secretaries, 425,000 truck drivers, and 408,000 janitors to replace the Baby Boomers who will retire. We'll even need 99,000 lawyers. I think we know where we can find this talent: right here in the city.

MARK TRAHANT

Mark Trahant is editor of the editorial page for the Seattle Post-Intelligencer. In that position, Trahant chairs the daily editorial board and directs a staff of writers, editors, and a cartoonist. He also writes a weekly Sunday column. Trahant is a member of Idaho's Shoshone-Bannock tribe and former president of the Native American Journalists Association. Trahant was a finalist for the 1989 Pulitzer Prize in national reporting as co-author of a series on federal-Indian policy. In 1995, Trahant was a visiting professional scholar at the Freedom Forum's First Amendment Center at Vanderbilt University. He is the author of Pictures of Our Nobler Selves, a history of American Indian contributions to journalism published by The Freedom Forum. He is also the author of The Whole Salmon, commissioned by Idaho's Sun Valley Center for the Arts. His most recent work is in an anthology, Lewis & Clark Through Indian Eyes (edited by Alvin Josephy).





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Roads, Interstates, and the Oregon Trail



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