

Home > Center for Indian Country Development > Research and Articles > CICD Blog  
> Women's History Month: Remembering Zitkála-Šá (Red Bird) – Cultural bridge builder as accomplished author, musician, and champion of Native American rights

CICD Working Paper Series

CICD Blog

Articles and Reports

## CICD Blog

[RSS](#) 

### Connect and Take Action

- [CICD Staff](#)
- [Events](#)
- [Subscribe to CICD blog and articles](#)
- [CICD Twitter](#)

## Women's History Month: Remembering Zitkála-Šá (Red Bird) – Cultural bridge builder as accomplished author, musician, and champion of Native American rights

She gave up her moccasins, her long hair, and her language, and then became Zitkála-Šá, "Red Bird," who devoted her life to advocating for Native Americans.

[Patrice Kunesh](#) | Assistant Vice President and Director of the Center for Indian Country Development

Published March 6, 2018

[TWEET](#) | [SHARE](#) | [POST](#) | [EMAIL](#) | [PRINT](#)



The Center for Indian Country Development is celebrating Women's History month this year by recognizing writer, composer, lecturer, and activist Gertrude Simmons Bonnin, also known as Zitkála-Šá (Red Bird), who was one of the first and most important American Indian reformers of the early twentieth century. Her writings and work as an Indian rights activist are a vital link between the oral cultures of tribal America and the literate culture of contemporary American Indians.

Born on the Yankton Sioux Reservation in 1876 in Dakota Territory, Gertrude and her siblings learned traditional Indian ways from their Dakota mother. Little is known of her non-Indian father. At the age of eight, Gertrude's mother sent her to a Quaker missionary school in Wabash, Indiana.

At boarding school, Gertrude was forced to give up her moccasins, her long hair, and her language, and to renounce her heritage. "Then I lost my spirit," as she described herself later in *The Schooldays of an Indian Girl*. She returned home to the reservation, but felt culturally unmoored - she was now living in two worlds. As an adult, she renamed herself Zitkála-Šá, which

means "Red Bird," and devoted her life to fighting for justice for Native Americans.

Gertrude had a thirst for learning, and continued her studies at Earlham College, and then at the Boston Conservatory of Music. She briefly taught music at Carlisle Indian School, but left in response to the school's harsh discipline and devaluation of the students' Native American cultural identities. An accomplished violinist, Gertrude worked with William Hanson to write *The Sun Dance*, the first and still one of the few grand operas written by an American Indian and featuring American Indian performers and musical and cultural themes.



Despite continual pressures to ignore her mother's Indian culture, Zitkala-Ša was deeply concerned about the treatment of American Indians by the state, church, and society at large at the time. In her 1901 anthology, *Old Indian Legends*, she expressed her struggles with the issues of cultural dislocation, injustice, and the suffering of her people. But her written words were not merely critical. In both her opera and her anthology, she was earnestly committed to being a bridge builder between cultures. "I have tried," she says in the introduction to that work, "to transplant the Native spirit of these tales into the English language, since America in the last few centuries has acquired a second tongue."

She married another Dakota named Raymond T. Bonnin, whom she met at the Standing Rock Reservation where both of them were employed by the Indian Service. The Bonnins then transferred to a reservation in Utah, and became affiliated with the Society of American Indians, considered to be "the first reform organization to be administered entirely by Native Americans" and a predecessor of modern organizations such as the National Congress of American Indians.

Her vocal activism for Native rights brought the Bonnins to Washington, D.C., where Gertrude continued her work with the Society and edited the *American Indian Magazine*. She was instrumental in the passage of the Indian Citizenship Bill in 1924, and in 1926, she founded the National Council of American Indians. In her role as Council President, she advocated for citizenship rights, better educational opportunities, improved health care, and cultural recognition and preservation. Her investigation into land mismanagement resulted in her appointment as an adviser to the U.S. government's Meriam Commission of 1928, the findings of which eventually led to several important reforms, including key elements of the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934. She continued to pursue more reforms through public speaking and lobbying efforts until her death in Washington, D.C. in 1938. Gertrude Zitkala-Ša Bonnin is buried in Arlington Cemetery