

VERONICA E. TILLER

## HISTORY, INDIANS, AND BUSINESS

*An Apache Story*

All my life I had heard about my tribe's history from my grandfather and other elders. I learned about how we had once been rounded up at bayonet point and moved hundreds of miles away from our sacred mountains and rivers, to face the challenges of forced assimilation and decimating diseases. Through it all, we had maintained our language and our customs, and only recently we had begun to thrive again. I was always proud to know from our oral history that my grandfathers had been instrumental in establishing our Indian reservation in northern New Mexico. Yet early in life I also discovered that nothing of my own history was in the history books I studied in school. From contact through war and peace, exile and return, and notwithstanding significant contributions to the region's economy, there was virtually no mention of the Jicarilla Apache in history as it was taught. I set out to change all this.

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When I approached my tribal council in 1972 for financial assistance to go on to graduate school at the University of New Mexico, they agreed to help, but their assistance came with a charge. They urged me to make sure our own story was told, to make others understand that we were not just an inconvenient footnote to their own history. My elders wanted me to make sure others knew not only that we had our own history, but also that we had been instrumental in shaping theirs. My master's thesis and my dissertation dealt with my Jicarilla Apache Tribe's history during the American era, from 1846 to 1970—then a quite current date.

Indian Country was not immune to the turbulence of the 1960s and the early 1970s. Indian people from all over the country joined protests at places like Alcatraz and Wounded

Knee, as well as a coast-to-coast caravan in a Trail of Broken Treaties. I wanted so badly to join in the protests, but luckily for me, Professor Richard Ellis persuaded me to stay the course. He told me I could do more for Indian people if I stayed and finished my degrees than I could by adding another body to the protests, which were already big enough to draw national attention.

In 1976, I received my PhD in the major fields of American, Western, and Native American history from UNM's Department of History. In that year, I was hired at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City to teach these three subjects. My career path began in the context of Indian tribes nationwide seeking more control over their own affairs and resources. For example, many demanded reclamation of hundreds of abandoned mine sites on their reservations, asserting prior rights to their precious water in the West, and pursuing claims for damages resulting from decades of clear-cutting forests. Given this urgency, I could not be persuaded to stay in the professoriate. My own tribe had already asked me to serve as an expert witness in landmark cases involving our water rights and tribal taxation of extractive industries. The experience led me to establish my own company.

In 1980, I left my tenure-track teaching position and opened my own research and consulting firm in Washington, DC,



Veronica Tiller used the research skills she learned as a history PhD to fulfill her tribal council's charge.

*Courtesy Emmie Frederiks*

to support tribes with their natural resource management and claims. In a sense, my training and skills allowed me to see how I could make history a business. Over the next 20 years, Tiller Research conducted social science research for more than 50 tribes throughout the country. My study of Native American history, federal Indian policies, and research methodology at UNM paid off big-time. History was not only interesting; it was important. It was useful!

In some cases, historical dispatches from US cavalry detachments supported current tribal water claims. A picture I unearthed at the Minnesota Historical Society Library showed that it took two whole railroad flat cars to accommodate logs taken from the Red Lake Indian Forest in the 1930s, documenting the validity of that tribe's claim that a magnificent white pine forest once stood there. I found myself conducting historical research to support litigation and historic preservation efforts, and to develop modern forest management plans, among other things. Building on what I learned in graduate school, my work has helped support tribal judgments and settlements in excess of \$200 million to date.

My work allowed me to travel from Maine to San Diego County, from the Arctic Ocean to the Everglades, and to observe firsthand a national renaissance of tribal economies that was not being reported anywhere. Eventually, I decided to bring this amazing story to a larger public by creating a publishing arm of Tiller Research, BowArrow Publishing, and releasing a reference guide to the federally recognized Indian reservations and their current reservation economies. *Tiller's Guide to Indian Country: Economic Profiles of American Indian Reservations*, first published in 1996, has gone through three editions and has received plaudits from the American Booksellers Association and the New Mexico Book Association. But more importantly, the guide has helped the Federal Emergency Management Agency brief first responders during natural disasters and provided evidence for the United States Department of Justice to use in federal court briefs. Even the Supreme Court has cited it in at least one decision.

Forty years ago, I couldn't find enough materials for my own college classes. Now, professors use my work in theirs. Although I chose not to follow the academic path to being a historian, my career has shown that historians' work beyond the professoriate can be just as influential and fulfilling.

My evolving "field of study," now focused on Native American economic development, provided me with business and speaking opportunities. The young academician who once was more at home on horseback on her family's cattle ranch than standing before a college class has been invited to address corporate executives, professors in Europe, and


UNESCO. As I built a professional reputation as a historian, I had the privilege of seeing my work incorporated into documentaries, museum exhibits, school textbooks and curriculum materials, and Internet digital databases.

Among all the things I have done with my career using my academic degree in history, I am most proud of establishing the annual celebration of the presidential executive order of February 11, 1887, creating our permanent reservation in northern New Mexico. Since the event's 100th anniversary in 1987, the Jicarilla Apache people have celebrated it annually for one full week in February. New Mexico Governor Gary Carruthers issued a proclamation recognizing February 11 as Jicarilla Apache Day in New Mexico.

I hope to unveil my next act as that of a biographer. I have chosen to chronicle the life of my great-grandfather James

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Garfield Velarde. He lived for more than 100 years (1853–1961), and his life encompassed our exile and return, buffalo hunts and the atomic bomb. As a chief of our Ollero band, he was involved in persuading the government to end our exile, and in my own girlhood, he was known as a spiritual leader and healer. He seems to have been a favored subject of photographers, including Edward S. Curtis and William Henry Jackson. His in-depth knowledge of our history and culture has had a lasting benefit for his people. His testimony before the Indian Land Claims Commission in 1958 helped to win our land claim. He was, in my opinion, the quintessential Apache historian, using history to benefit his people.

I hope to have honored my grandfather's contributions to our tribal history, and I hope I have been faithful to my tribe's charge and to my own advice to tell our own story. This has all been possible because of my study of Native American history, my college teaching experience, my research and publishing business, and most of all, the people who helped me along the way. 

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