

Of Course I Drink; I'm an Indian

by Mary Patrick

If you were an Indian . . .

- Your life span would be 42-43 years, 21 years shorter than that of your fellow citizens;
- Your income would be \$1,500, 75% below the national average, and \$1,000 lower than that of the average black family;
- You would have, on the average, five years of schooling, and your probability of unemployment would be ten times the national average;
- The mortality rate of your child during the first year of life would be twice that of the white baby;
- The suicide rate of your teenager would be 100 times that of the whites;
- The odds would be 2-to-1 that your child would never finish high school and 100-to-1 that he would not graduate from college;
- You would have a 400 per cent greater chance of contracting tuberculosis and an 800 per cent higher chance of acquiring hepatitis;
- You would likely live without plumbing or bathing facilities in a two- or three-room shack.¹

With such a dreary prospect for life, it is little wonder that American Indians have the most serious drinking problem of any group in the United States.

There are those who agree, however, that the problem of Indian alcoholism goes beyond the frustration that results from their present situation. Many Indians, of course, blame the white man for giving them alcohol in the first place without instructing them in its use. They were handed a jug, the Indians point out, and invited to "drink up" without having any idea of what to expect. And they drank. Being totally unfamiliar with alcohol, they were unprepared for the results.

Many of the wiser leaders realized the potential danger of alcohol and tried to combat it. Some even went so far as to send representatives to Washington to try to stop the sale of alcohol to Indians. There were certain advantages, however, to be gained by the white men if they could, by contributing to drunkenness among the Indians, separate the people from their leaders, turn brother against brother, and, in general, hasten the disintegration of the tribal structure. Many Indians, and perhaps with considerable justification, argue that this early disintegration of tribal solidarity contributed to frustrations that exist even today and are frequently manifest in drunkenness.

By the time the Indians were placed on reservations, the federal government had come to see the necessity of trying to combat the alcohol evil; so, until a little over twenty-five years ago, it was illegal to sell alcohol to Indians, and it was illegal for an Indian to have alcohol on the reservation. The law, however, did not stop the Indians from drinking any more than prohibition eliminated alcohol from American society. It simply meant that the Indians had to pay two or three times the normal price for a bottle that some bootlegger was willing to sell them. It also meant that the Indians could go to jail if they got caught with their bottles. The inevitable result was that the Indians had to get rid of their liquor as quickly as possible; so they often went out behind a building or down in a gully and—bottoms up—got rid of the alcohol as quickly as they could drink it. They developed a drinking pattern that involved getting drunk as quickly as possible before they were caught and lost their liquor. This pattern has frequently remained among Indians even though the law that spawned it has been declared unconstitutional.²

The stereotype of "the drunken Indian" that grew out of the early contact between Indians and white men who brought the alcohol seems to be supported by contemporary statistics. For example, no other ethnic group in the United States has as high a crime rate per capita as the American Indian. The death rate from alcoholic cirrhosis for Indians is more than twice the national average. Accidental deaths, many of them related to alcohol, are about 160 per 100,000 among Indians as opposed to 55 per 100,000 for all races. Homocides, also frequently related to drunkenness, are 16 per 100,000 among Indians as opposed to 5 per 100,000 among all races. Many reservation leaders consider alcoholism as one of their greatest health problems, and many programs have received federal funding to aid in the control of alcoholism.³

Statistics from Gallup, New Mexico, further support the point that alcoholism is a problem of major proportions. Of approximately 600-700 arrests per month for drunkenness, approximately 90 per cent are Navaho. Gallup, easily accessible by pickup truck from the nearby reservation, has forty or more bars, and they are usually filled to capacity on weekends. In some instances entire families frequent

the bars, the parents drinking and visiting while their children play on the floor. More frequently, however, the occupants of the bars are Indian men who, instead of having a few drinks and going home, stay and drink until they run out of money or get into trouble and get themselves arrested. Some of them have been arrested and jailed as many as 100 times.⁴

Apparently the Indians around Gallup do not limit their drinking to their trips to town, however, for arrests for drunkenness on the reservation totaled 6,565 in 1958, 8,536 in 1959, and 9,017 in 1960. Of a total population of 100,000, the Navaho tribal government estimates that they have 3000 alcoholics, 10,000 problem drinkers, and 35,000 family members involved to some extent with alcohol.⁵ Even if these figures are not absolutely accurate, they indicate a problem of colossal proportions.

National figures for 1960 also support the theory that alcoholism is a greater problem among the Indians than among non-Indians. The arrest rate per 100,000 population reads as follows: for white, total arrests were 1,700 with 780 or 47 per cent being related to alcohol; for Chinese and Japanese, total arrests were 1,100 with 270 or 24 per cent being related to alcohol; for Negroes, total arrests were 5,900 with 2,000 or 33 per cent being related to alcohol; for Indians, total arrests were 15,000 with 11,000 or 76 per cent being related to alcohol.⁶

Obviously statistics of this type invite, even demand, attention, and many theories exist which attempt to explain why the problem of alcoholism appears to be greater among Indians than among any other segment of the American population. Certainly there is much evidence to indicate that Indians drink because of stress, because of conflicts arising from their efforts to live within two worlds simultaneously, because of substandard education, lack of skills, poor living conditions, and any number of other anxieties. There are, however, Indians who, apparently, drink for the joy of drinking. They are a part of a social environment which places much emphasis on companionship, and drinking is a part of this fellowship. Refusal to accept a drink or refusal to buy a drink for a friend is considered an affront. Obviously, the Indians who drink for the joy of drinking cannot be classified as anxious, frustrated individuals suffering from conflicts and stress. Further support for the idea that stress is not the only cause of alcoholism among Indians is the fact that the more traditional the Indians are, the more intense they are about their drinking, and the more acculturated they are, the less likely they are to respond to treatment.⁷ It would appear, then, that the frustrations of assimilation are not necessarily the cause of drinking among Indians, but that they do impede the treatment of alcoholics.

There are indeed certain cultural and environmental factors which some Indians maintain contribute to alcoholism among Native

Americans. For example, most tribes have traditionally honored their warriors, allowing them special privileges and benefits. Veterans of the wars of the United States are, in many instances, considered warriors, and are, therefore, privileged characters not expected to observe tribal rules and regulations if they chose not to do so. One man tells the following story:

After I got back to the states, I found that my girl was engaged to somebody else. I was still under age, but I managed to get me some pints. I remember leaving the train depot in Oakland, California, leaving for Iowa, but all I can remember is getting on that train. The rest is a total blackout. And the next thing that I remember was standing outside the station in Ames, Iowa. It was January, and I was standing there shivering, and I didn't know where I was. I didn't even realize I was off the train. After awhile I got myself collected enough to find out where I was and to work my way to Des Moines and home.

I was sick for a good while after that. My mother took care of me. As soon as I was well enough, she let me have liquor again. She didn't think there was any reason why I shouldn't drink. She thought I deserved that right by virtue of going overseas, serving in the navy. She allowed me that right. It has something to do with Indian pride, the pride in a warrior returned from battle.⁸

The problem, of course, perpetrates itself. Another veteran of World War II explains it as follows:

When I came out of the army, I didn't have a trade, but my dad gave me a little bit of his cattle, and I started into the cattle business. I ran it up into a pretty good enterprise, I might say, and then my drinking got pretty bad, and I drank it up. I'd take a cow to market, and I'd get about two hundred and fifty off of her. I'd get a couple of jugs and then get drunk on the two jugs and lose the two hundred and forty-five dollars. The average was about two dollars a jug, and I'd lose about two hundred and forty-six dollars. Somebody'd frisk it out of my pockets. Then I'd feel so bad I'd just go and get drunk again.⁹

Frequently the returning veterans are not so fortunate as to have a father who can start them in business. Often they return to the reservation only to find that there are no jobs available or that they have no skills. As one man put it, "I was trained as a fireman in the navy. Now, who needs a fireman on a reservation?"¹⁰ Many of them, frustrated with their inability to provide for themselves and their families, turn to drink.

The lack of constructive activity on reservations and land allotment areas affects not only the older Indians but the younger ones also. One Alabama Indian expressed it this way:

In the Indian community where I grew up, the young boys—they never finished high school—always quit and went to work before they were sixteen or seventeen years old, and they worked all week to make a buck to get drunk on the weekend. And I think they did this primarily because there was nothing else to do. There were no organizations for them to belong to, no clubs, nothing. And people have to have something to do. So, being human, if there's nothing available, they will find something. And, for some reason, when people

look for something to do, the majority will usually find something bad. There's always somebody around to supply something that's not very good for the body or the soul or the mind. This is usually the case with reservation kids.¹¹

An Oklahoma Indian tells a similar story:

In the summers or when I was kicked out of school, there wasn't much to do. Weren't any jobs, you know. You might say I wasn't worried about a job. I'd just bum around. That's when I started drinking; I was about fifteen years old. I just got in with guys that were older. I wanted to impress people, you know. By seventeen or eighteen, I was drinking with men, and I could drink with the best of them.¹²

In many instances, however, idleness is not the greatest contributing factor in the problem of Indian alcoholism. The simple fact that one is Indian often contributes frustrations that the individual cannot cope with and seeks to escape from. Indians are frequently torn between their heritage and their environment. When the Indian child, who has often been taught that he is a member of a proud and honorable tribe, goes to school and is told that he is dirty, lazy, and stupid, he does not understand. When he is beaten for speaking the only language he knows instead of English, he becomes confused. When he is denied school honors and admission to school clubs because he is Indian, he often becomes rebellious. When, out of his blind fog of confusion, he lashes out, he is arrested for fighting. Often treated harshly by legal authorities, he is left more confused than ever. When he finds that he cannot be himself, cannot join the larger society, and cannot beat it, what is left for him except to try to drown his troubles? And this is often exactly what he does.

It is understandable then, when one considers his heritage, his social customs, and the dreary prospects that exist for the reservation Indian, why he and so many of his brothers seek escape through alcohol. It is understandable, too, that many of them choose to leave the reservations and to relocate to urban areas in the hope of improving their lots in life. Instead of finding in the city a solution to their problems, however, they often find that they have merely compounded their frustrations. Often they find themselves in a cold, hostile environment without family or friends to whom they can turn. They are frequently faced with unemployment for the same reasons that they found no work in the land allotment areas: they lack the basic skills necessary. They may also be confronted with the problem of prejudiced employers who refuse to hire Indians, believing them all to be lazy, beligerant, and undependable. They are limited, too, in the type of housing they can afford and in the neighborhoods where they can live, for in many areas they are simply not allowed; in spite of the existing housing laws, landlords find ways of keeping out those whom they do not desire as tenants. The Indian, not being by nature what the white man considers aggressive, often settles for substandard

housing in undesirable neighborhoods and for the lowest paying jobs available rather than fight what he has already learned is a losing battle. Often his problems are compounded by homesickness, but, having no money to go home, he turns to the bottle. One Indian woman is convinced that the problem of alcoholism among urban Indians is the result of these frustrations. She says:

The Indian new to the city comes in contact with things he's never heard of or seen before in his life. The average American can't understand this because he doesn't realize that there are areas right here in the United States with no postal service, no rail delivery, no telephones; there is absolutely no way to get there except by your own car, and in some instances, to walk. And for a person who has lived out in that area suddenly to come in—in to where everyone knows what he's doing—it suddenly gives him the feeling that he doesn't know anything about anything, anyway, and there's really no use trying. That's the very height of frustration; to feel that everybody else in the world knows how to do everything and you know absolutely nothing and there's no use trying.

You don't have to ban Indians from a place to keep them out. Unless they absolutely know they're welcome, they're not going into a place. Now, this cuts down on where they can go, especially since they don't speak English as well as other people, and they don't come up to the economic standards of other people. So they seek out places where they can find other Indians and where they are welcomed. And those places are very few. In fact, most places are vastly expensive, especially the private clubs where you have to get a card to get in. It would never occur to an Indian that all you have to do is put down the proper amount of money and sign the card and you can become a member of these places. When the person at the door says you can't get in unless you are a member, the Indian simply assumes that you don't want him, and it would never occur to him to inquire how to become a member. So he's excluded from a great number of places simply because he doesn't know how it is that you get in, and he doesn't know where you go to find out, and he doesn't know how to act. And city people are very unfriendly to people who don't know these things. The Indian simply avoids all these places. And it is very difficult to find places to go for entertainment in the city, especially when you have an economic problem. So, naturally, the Indians congregate in the few places they feel comfortable. And, naturally, if these are not very good places, they pick up the bad habits of these places and continue to go there, and the situation gets worse and worse.¹⁷

Usually the frustrated urban Indians congregate at the places they are sure to find other Indians—the Indian bars. The bar section of a town is an undesirable area, but the section of Indian bars is “the lowest of the low.” Usually the Indian bar section invites a criminal element because people searching for something that they are unable to obtain are easy victims. Also, taking advantage of Indians is no great risk because there is little they can do to protect themselves. They usually do not know how to go about seeking police protection or legal aid, and if they do, they usually are afraid to turn to the courts or the police because they have too often been victims of the very system that is supposed to protect them. It is not surprising, then, to find that Indian bars often shelter a city's criminal element.

Neither is it surprising to find that the police patrol the Indian bar area more closely than they do many other sections of the city. Those arrested, however, are not the people who prey on the Indians; instead, they are most often the Indians themselves. And the Indians are usually arrested for being drunken and disorderly, for Indians, when they have been drinking, love to fight. If there is no white person around to fight, then Indians will fight other Indians. Indians do not usually drink two beers and go home; they stay and drink until the bar closes, or until they run out of money, or until they get into a fight and are arrested and hauled off to jail. If they go home, they often seek to relieve their tensions by beating their wives; if they go to jail, they often find that they are still in jail on Monday morning when they should be at work. And on Tuesday they find that they have been fired, their behavior being reinforced the beliefs of their employers that all Indians are drunken and undependable. Their faith in themselves is again shaken, and they gravitate toward the bars again in an effort to escape their frustrations. One man explained it thus:

We have to consider the fact that quite often the Indian is not as aggressive as other members of society, at least not in his outward appearance and in his dealing with the non-Indian culture. However, underneath he may feel very bitter about some things, and when he gets a few drinks under his belt, when he gets a little tight, some of these feelings begin to come out. He actually may be feeling much more aggressive than he ever appeared to feel. And when he gets drunk, he may be looking for a fight, and it doesn't matter who with. He may just be frustrated with the total environment and the non-Indian. And so, quite often, when Indian people get intoxicated, they do get involved in very aggressive tactics. This is simply their reaction to their environment.¹⁴

Another Indian supported the argument that Indian alcoholism is a result of environment:

Indians drink because of a basic confusion, an inability to deal with problems. And alcohol is a crutch, a cure-all. But I think only a small percentage of Indians could articulate those things which impel them. Consequently, most Indians who drink really don't know what they're doing. They're just reacting to their general confusion, the confusion of having to adapt to an alien society.¹⁵

The stereotype—the drunken Indian image—probably contributes to Indian alcoholism. One Indian said:

I grew up among drinking Indians. When I was a teenager, the way to spend Saturday afternoons—if you were a white kid—was to go down to the Indian bar section and watch the Indians staggering along bumping into the walls. At school they'd taunt us and tell us we'd grow up to be like that. We hadn't seen many Indians who didn't drink, so we believed them. We were surrounded by it. I've seen Indian women coming out of bars carrying their babies upside down. I've seen them lose their kids when they were too drunk to know what they did with them. I've seen Indians blow a whole paycheck

on a weekend drunk. And I grew up feeling that, because I was Indian, everyone expected me to do the same thing.¹⁶

Another Indian explained:

I hated being Indian. Everyone expected an Indian to be a no-good drunk. And the Indians figured that if that was what was expected of them, that's what they would do. Even if they didn't really like it, they figured that all Indians did it, and they wouldn't be different.¹⁷

Whatever the causes of Indian alcoholism, whether the problem is the result of heredity, of environment, of cultural factors, of adjustment problems in an urban environment, or of some other factor, the problem is a very real one that has elicited much attention in recent years from local police departments, from social workers, from Bureau of Indian Affairs employees, and from the Indians themselves. Many reservations, often with the help of federal funds, have established alcoholism programs to help Indians who desire to overcome their drinking problems. Urban Indians have been of particular concern, and most cities with large Indian populations also have alcoholism programs. Many cities have half-way houses for recovering alcoholics. These halfway houses provide living quarters, meals, and programs of various types in addition to counseling services for the Indians. They are almost always staffed by recovered alcoholics who are themselves Indian. There are two reasons for this: first, no one understand the problems of an alcoholic better than someone who has experienced the same problems; and second, Indians respond better to other Indians than they do to non-Indians. As one counsellor explained it:

You can't counsel with an Indian like you do a white person. I can't get that across to some people, though. Eye contact is not the same. An Indian won't look you in the eye. It doesn't bother me one bit to sit and talk to an Indian because I know what he's going to do. But it would bother a white person for an Indian to sit there and say something and maybe three or four minutes later say something else. But that's just the way an Indian is. The doctor at the alcoholic ward at the state hospital where we get most of our clients doesn't understand this. He just laughs when I tell him that an Indian can do more with them than a white man, but it's true. He just doesn't understand Indians; he means well, but he's just ignorant, that's all.¹⁸

According to another halfway house director, Indians have more trouble gaining sobriety and maintaining it than do non-Indians. Part of the problem, he maintains, is that Indians simply do not understand quite as well as non-Indians what is expected of them and how to go about doing it. His approach with an Indian alcoholic is to sit down and speak very frankly with him, to remind the Indian of his proud heritage and to tell him that he is a disgrace to that heritage. The counsellor points out that there are no curse words in the Indian's native tongue and asks him if he is trying to become a White or a Black

or a Mexican because he is cursing like the non-Indians. He asks his client what he is doing to deserve the love of his Indian mother. All of these questions are designed to make the Indian remember his heritage and his Indian teachings, for that, the counsellor maintains, is all an Indian understands. He must be approached as an Indian first and as an alcoholic second; the approach of the non-Indian AA programs simply are not effective with Indians.¹⁹

One of the problems faced by Indian AA workers is the lack of understanding on the part of the non-Indian program directors who simply do not perceive the problems that are uniquely Indians. One director put it this way:

I encounter static sometimes from the people who write the theory behind alcoholism programs. I don't always follow the book. The book may say that the person who sits with his arms folded has a negative attitude; well, the Indian sits that way all the time, and it doesn't have anything to do with his attitude. The theory may be all right for white alcoholics, but even then it doesn't always hold true. You have to know the individual involved. An Indian, for example, is negative and always has been negative in his outlook. How could he be otherwise? All he has ever heard about Indians is bad: they drink; they are lazy; they are dumb. Well, you don't reverse that kind of attitude simply by telling an Indian not to sit with his arms folded. And you don't start by telling him all the things that are wrong with him; he's been hearing that all his life. That may be why he's an alcoholic. The way to help an Indian alcoholic is to give him something positive in his life. Make him feel a little pride in being Indian. Remind him of the valuable things in his heritage. Give him something to hold on to while he tries to pull himself up. When you start talking to an Indian about his faults, he just gets mad and turns you off. He's heard it all already. You have to handle an Indian alcoholic differently from a non-Indian alcoholic. And the books don't tell you that.²⁰

But the fact that much money and effort is being channeled into Indian alcoholism programs does not insure an end to the problem of drinking among Indians. As with any other group, the Indian himself has to desire to break his drinking habit before anyone can help him. It is the belief of most Indian counsellors, however, that Indians are more likely to respond to the efforts of other Indians to help them than they are to the efforts of white people, whom they frequently blame for their drinking problems in the first place. Most counsellors refuse to try to analyze the success of their programs, arguing that their efforts cannot always justifiably be labeled as failures simply because a client returns to his drinking pattern after several weeks of sober residence in a halfway house. They maintain that the seed may often remain dormant long after it is planted yet may still germinate and grow into something worthwhile. One success now and then is often the best they can hope for. As one counsellor put it:

The problem is that most people who need help don't want it. You can't just go out and bring some guy in. He's not going to stay. He's not ready yet.

It gets pretty discouraging sometimes, but you can't give up because you're emotionally involved with these people. So you keep trying. I know it's a long

hard thing for an Indian to stop drinking. It's hard to stay sober. But the reward is the guy who comes in here and does make it. And his family—he gets a job and gets to smiling again. Then there are the ones who stay two or three weeks and are back on the streets again—drinking again. That's as disturbing as hell. But we have to keep trying.

We have to keep trying.²¹

NOTES

1. Rennard Strickland and Jack Gregory, "Nixon and the Indian," *Commonweal*, 4 Sept. 1970, p. 432.
2. Robert Beams, personal interview held in Dallas, Texas, January 11, 1972.
3. Jerrold E. Levy and Stephen J. Kunitz, *Indian Drinking: Navajo and Anglo-American Theories* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1974), p. 2.
4. Frances Northend Ferguson, "Navaho Drinking: Some Tentative Hypotheses," *Native Americans Today: Sociological Perspectives*, eds. Howard M. Bahr, Bruce A. Chadwick, and Robert C. Day (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1972), p. 347.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 348.
6. Theodore D. Graves, "Drinking and Drunkenness Among Urban Indians," *The American Indian in Urban Society*, eds. Jack O. Waddell and O. Michael Watson (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1971), p. 281.
7. Levy and Kunitz, p. 5.
8. Richard Poweshiek, personal interview held in Dallas, Texas, January 19, 1974.
9. John Well, personal interview held in Dallas, Texas, June 19, 1974.
10. Bill Karty, personal interview held in Dallas, Texas, June 19, 1974.
11. Matt Taylor, personal interview held in Dallas, Texas, January 6, 1972.
12. Karty, June 19, 1974.
13. Raven Hail, personal interview held in Dallas, Texas, March 4, 1972.
14. Beams, January 11, 1972.
15. Claude Barnes, personal interview held in Dallas, Texas, June 19, 1974.
16. LeRoy Mason, personal interview held in Dallas, Texas, October 6, 1974.
17. Whitman Harry, personal interview held in Dallas, Texas, January 19, 1974.
18. Karty, June 19, 1974.
19. Ralph Wermly, personal interview held in Dallas, Texas, January 26, 1974.
20. Wermly, January 26, 1974.
21. Karty, June 19, 1974.