

## THE RIDGEVILLE STORY: The Invisible Indian Is Becoming A Force

For over 100 years 300 Indians of Cherokee ancestry hunted, farmed and inhabited lands known as Four Holes. This lowland country is separated from the white man's land by both tangible and intangible barriers. There exists a white community, a black area, and an Indian area. The three groups only meet when it becomes necessary to spend money at the local merchants'. The cost of many items are higher to the blacks and the Indians at the local stores. The philosophy of separate and unequal permeates the area: the cemetery, the church, the school.

The Indians at Four Holes, part of 1300 Cherokees in the immediate area, have been culturally deprived to the point of a heritage disintegration. The Indian and his family survive only because of his individual resourcefulness. In 1963, with the awareness that only through education could they continue to exist in this new mechanical age, a few Indians attempted to organize a community project to better educate their children. Job opportunities were almost non-existent for the Indian either because of his own lack of education or because of discrimination. (The female Indian, who is barely able to read or write, has found it impossible to find work.) Some Indians have gone to school intermittently for 10 to 12 years but have not gone beyond second grade in achievement level. This can be attributed to the fact that until 1963, when a two classroom concrete block building was speedily erected to pacify this newly vocal group, the only school building one can remember was a one room wooden shack with a pot bellied stove.

Along with the newly constructed school came three unqualified teachers and one unqualified principal. The teachers had no college training and the principal makes claim to about two years of college. There was no rapport between the children and the teachers. Many of the children were given menial tasks around the building. Some were made to clean the teacher's nails and to comb her hair.

The distrust of the Indian toward the school people, coupled with the vast spread of disease among the children and the economic demands of the family was of such an overwhelming nature that the children averaged a yearly attendance of 3 months. The children were passed from grade to grade until they reached 6th grade. Their advancement was made despite the lack of grade knowledge in reading, arithmetic and other academic subjects. The children were held in sixth grade until they became discouraged and dropped out of school. In this manner, the problem of Indian children going on to higher education was solved.

In 1966, the Indian parents requested that their children be transferred from the segregated Four Holes Elementary School to the Ridgeville Elementary School. Their request was denied on the grounds of overcrowding at the Ridgeville School. Then for some reason, the school suddenly about faced and decided to allow 12 Indian children to enter the Ridgeville School for the second half of the 1966-1967 school year. Two months later, in just as sudden a turn about as before the 12 Indian children were returned to the segregated Four Holes School without explanation. The following year, a portable classroom building was placed on the

grounds of the Four Holes School and hot lunches were given for the first time.

The Indian community was still determined to continue its attempts to end the use of the Four Holes School. It turned to the black community for aid and assistance. The black community, has, through freedom-of choice, been able to partially integrate the previously all white school. After much inter-community discussion, it was decided to have the Indian parents fill out their freedom of choice forms prior to the black parents for the 1968-1969 school year. Two weeks before school was to open, the Indian parents received instructions to have their children report to the Four Holes School once again because of the overcrowded conditions at the Ridgeville School. Within one week of the opening of school, all the black parents filing freedom-of-choice forms were given instructions to have their children report to the Ridgeville Elementary School.

Nevertheless, when school opened, the Indian parents took their children to the Ridgeville School. The Indians were told that there was no room at the school and to return to the Four Holes School. Subsequently, court action was taken in Columbia, South Carolina on the grounds of violation of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. After a hearing, the U.S. District Court issued an order to have 15 Indian children admitted to Ridgeville. The remainder (approximately 50 children) were to return to the Four Holes School. The court also ordered that the Four Holes School close the following year.

The black and Indian communities felt that the court was insensitive to their needs and a boycott of the Four Holes School was called. In addition, a boycott of the local merchants was called. After a short period, the school board voted 3-2 to have the Ridgeville School enroll all the Indian children. The superintendent of schools advised the Indian parents to enroll their children the following day. This was on a Friday and on Monday to return with the necessary money to pay for the school books. The Indian parents reported as directed on Monday and were promptly ordered off the school grounds and told they would be subject to immediate arrest if they resisted. Several were arrested that day and several more on the following day at a meeting held on private property. It became apparent that over the weekend the school board had buckled under the pressure from the white power structure.

At this point, an Indian Freedom School was established under the leadership of a black woman, Mrs. Victoria DeLee, an Indian woman, Mrs. Gertie Creel, and five University of South Carolina students. The U.S.C. students became enthusiastically involved in the project and they soon left the university to devote their time completely to the Freedom School. All but seven of the Four Holes School children left to attend the Freedom School.

Within several weeks, the Welfare department cut off financial aid to five families due to the children's attendance at the Freedom School. All Federal food stamp distribution was also stopped.

The parents were told that all aid would be returned as soon as the children returned to the Four Holes School.

In spite of this intimidation the Indian Freedom School has progressed and grown. The school hours are from 9:00 to 2:00 P.M. daily. Full course instruction in such subject areas as reading, mathematics, history, and writing are given. Plans for hygiene, nutrition and Indian history on an adult level are being worked out for the community. Community parents working together for the first time are preparing hot breakfasts and lunches for the children. A mobile health unit of the O.E.O. has been able to meet with the children and treat them for such diseases as conjunctivitis, intestinal parasites and staph infection.

In order to maintain and hopefully expand this tremendous effort, a great deal of assistance is needed. Outside help has been good but it is not enough. There is a need for money, clothing and shoes (children's, men's and women's), canned foods of all varieties.

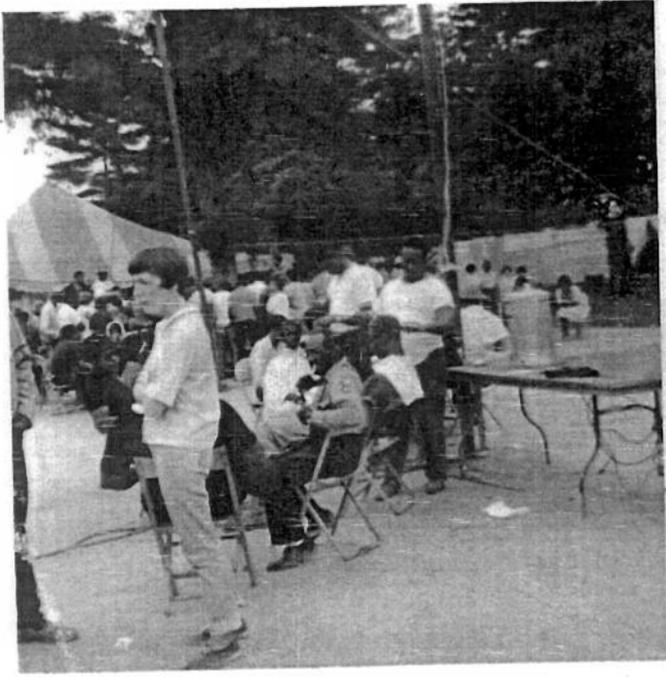
All checks should be made out to:

Four Holes Indian Freedom School

All contributions may be sent to Mrs. Gertie Creel  
Route # 2 Box 140  
Ridgeville, South Carolina

OR

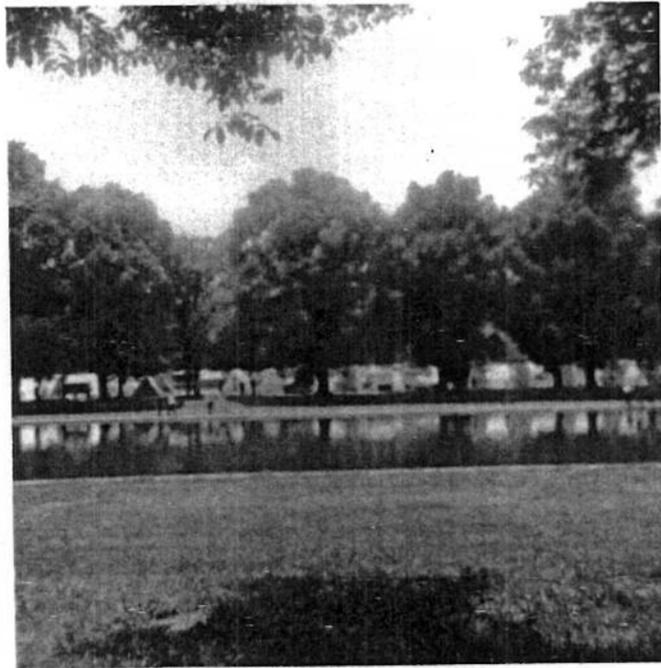
For further information contact Leon Gatherz  
Woodlands High School  
or  
Phone 914 BE5-7762



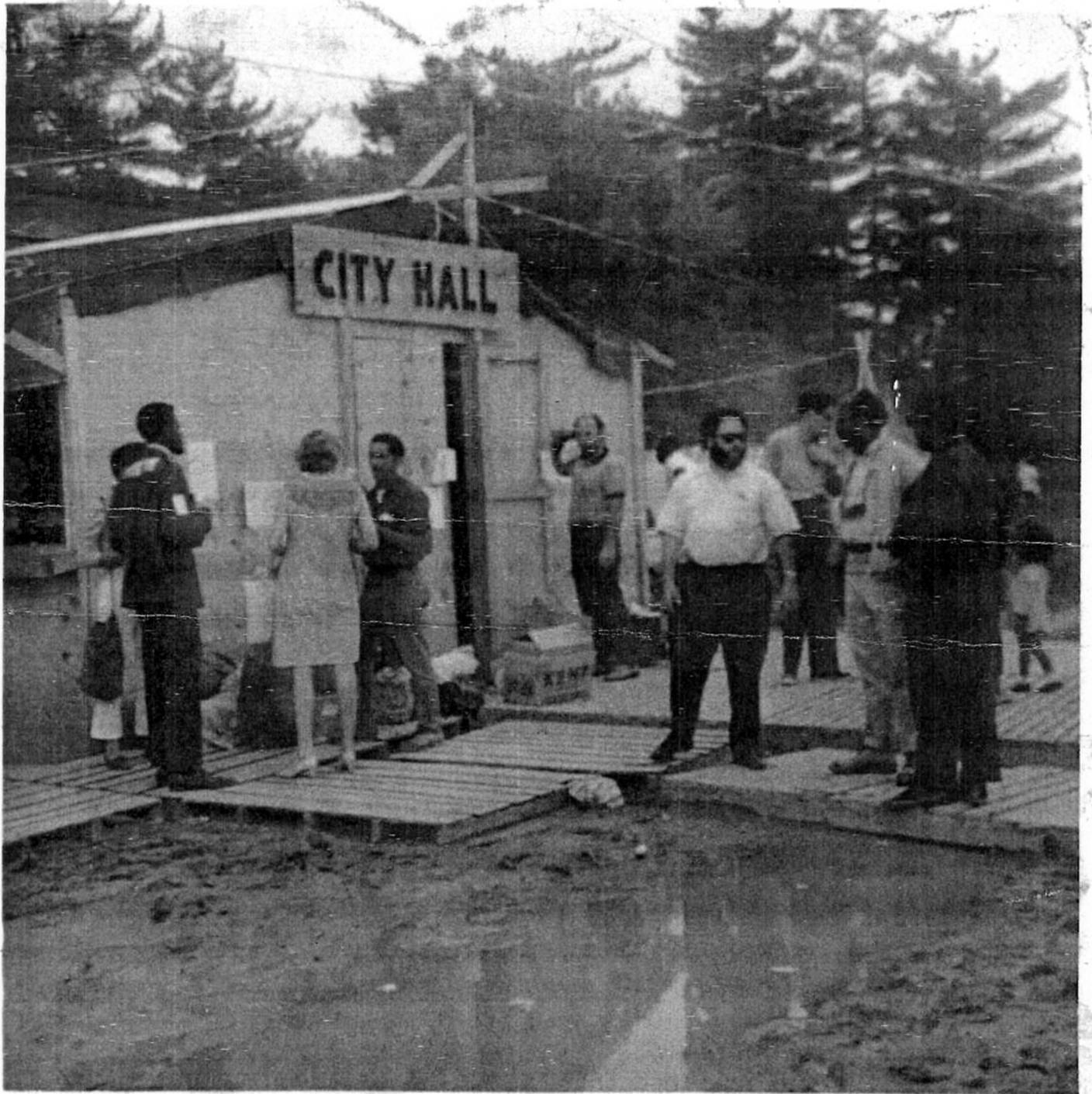
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