

# THE MUSEUM OF THE PLAINS WHITE PERSON

*Rayna Green*

*Rayna Green, a Cherokee woman born in 1942 in Dallas, Texas, is director of the American Indian Program at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History. A folklorist, scholar, poet, and essayist, she also knows how to dish out the legendary humor so characteristic of native peoples. In an "after feast speech" she gave before hundreds of native women at a 1981 conference on educational equity in Tahlequah, Oklahoma, she targeted museum policies regarding collecting native sacred objects and bones. Her comments were made nine years before President George Bush signed landmark legislation protecting Indian grave sites on federal lands from looting and making it easier for tribes to repatriate culturally identifiable remains, funerary objects, and sacred objects found on federal (not state or private) lands.*

The thing I'm most excited about recently is the grand project. This is a multimillion-dollar project; it's been funded by all the major foundations in the country. It's very exciting. As you know, all over the country, the Cherokee Nation and many of the Indian nations all over the country have established their own museums. I've done a great deal of museum consulting for the National Endowment for the tribal museums, for the Indian Museum Association. But I had found a real lack of a particular kind of museum that I really feel we need. And this is going to be a major cultural institution. I want to tell you about it because I am so thrilled to be part of this. This idea, I have to give credit, was originally hatched up by the ex-chairman of the Winnebago Tribe, Louis LaRose, and myself, late one night in a serious scholarly discussion in Albuquerque. Basically what we want to develop is a unique, cultural institution. I know you will be thrilled. This is an institution that is meant for Indian people. It is something we've been needing for a long time. It's something that is particularly needed to meet a very special critical need. The museum is called THE MUSEUM OF THE PLAINS WHITE PERSON. It meets this critical need that I spoke of. It's very serious. You see, we began to be very worried. As you know their (White people's) culture is dying out. Very soon, very soon there will be very few surviving White persons. We worry about this. What will the last surviving White persons do when they have no one to ask what their language was like, what their customs and clothes were like? So, we began to worry about this and we came up with the idea of the MUSEUM OF THE PLAINS WHITE PERSON. As I said, it's been met with great reception all over the country. Foundations have rushed to pour money in. Indian people have given money for it. I can't tell you how many shawl and blanket raffles have gone on to pay for this museum. And I want to tell you something about the museum and perhaps this will inspire some of you to go to those few White people that you know are living out there and quickly acquire artifacts from them before they disappear. Because, you know, they don't know how to take care of them. We worry about this. It's quite serious.

The first big collection that we are working on, and this is really inspiring, is the bone collection. As you know, all museums have to have a bone collection. We have begun a national campaign to acquire the bones of famous White people. We want little Indian children to be able to come in and study these and Indian scholars want to pore over them, the different skull shapes and so forth. And, of course, when we do acquire them we will acquire them permanently. As

you know, they cannot be given back once they have been handled. We do need to study them for years. And so we are acquiring these. We have just acquired, I think, what is a quite moving find. One of the most important ones. We have just acquired the bones of John Wayne. As you realize what great significance this can have for the scholars, what a study of his bones will tell us about these people and what their lives were like. Well, so that's very important.

There are a number of other famous bones that we want to acquire and I am sure you can begin to guess whose we have our sights on. It's going to be thrilling. The collection will be quite large, of course. We have planned to make the collection as large as it needs to be with as many samples. So, we are going to begin a massive grave excavation all over the country. We have, through our legal offices, which have become very sophisticated, as you know, acquired clear title to at least eighty percent of all the graves in White cemeteries all over the country. We plan to move in with steam shovels right away. We've acquired Mr. Peabody's big coal shovel which did strip mining up at Northern Cheyenne in order to begin and it's going to be an amazing project.

I'll tell you a few things about some of the other collections that I think are quite exciting. We are going to have collections of their food, for example – their food ways. We are going to reconstruct a McDonald's in its entirety. In that we're going to have true-to-life plastic exhibits of white bread, mayonnaise, iceberg lettuce and peanut butter which will be everywhere – smeared all over everything. Primarily stuck to the roof of everyone's mouth. We are going to have several exhibits about their customs. We want to have some performing arts there and we have found the last of a number of White people who know their dances and songs and who have preserved these intact and we are going to have everyday, living exhibits of the two-step, the fox trot, the disco and other dances. This is going to be very exciting when children come to visit, particularly.

We have acquired exhibits of their costumes. In fact, in the condominium that we are going to reconstruct in its entirety, inside the museum, there will be a typical little family with the gentleman in a three-piece suit and a briefcase and all the other artifacts of their civilization.

We have found one very unusual thing that I do want to tell you about. It's an archaeological remain that we have found somewhat in the vicinity of what used to be called "Los Angeles." It's very interesting. It proves that their culture was very flighty. They seemed to change rulers quite regularly. It's kind of interesting. In fact, we found an archaeological artifact that indicates that they changed rulers regularly. It's a big thing they used to call a neon sign – and it says QUEEN FOR A DAY. We are going to do some more excavation to determine just how they did depose their rulers and how they transferred power.

Well, I think you'll agree that this is one of the most exciting things that Indian people have done – one of the most exciting contributions that we could make. As young Indian scholars we are deeply pleased to be able to make this.