

VIEWS FROM THE RESERVATION: A New Edition

By John Willis with contributions from the Lakota people and an essay by Kent Nerburn

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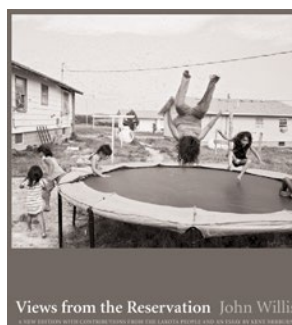
Almost ten years after publishing the first edition of his *Views from the Reservation*, award-winning photographer John Willis offers this expanded new edition. Willis's pictures, along with contributions from Lakota Elders, artists and youth, plus non-Native writer Kent Nerburn, illustrate the dark reality and unencumbered spirit that encompass life on the Pine Ridge Reservation. The Elders are the keepers of Lakota culture. Their texts speak of oneness, unconditional love and respect for all beings. Poems by ninth through twelfth graders address both the pain and the beauty in their lives. Nerburn writes about the unyielding presence of the landscape and its infectious power of spirit. He speaks of the heart of the people and the cohesion of families living in the challenging reservation environment. Nerburn also addresses the racism, poverty and social injustices faced by the Lakota both past and present.

John Willis's photographs elucidate Lakota life. They are the anchor to the writings. Willis's mostly black and white pictures celebrate the land and introduce the people. He offers a clear eyed view of the joys of the human heart despite a poverty of circumstances. In his *Mitakuye Oyasin (Opening Prayer)* Willis humbly states, "I am an outsider, no matter how many times I visit. Even as I may sense the heartbeat of the Reservation through its land and people, I do not presume to be able to do more than scratch the surface in my photographic work." Willis has photographed at the Pine Ridge Reservation for almost 30 years and he indeed senses the heartbeat. He has revealed wondrous lives transcending grim reservation conditions as the government continues their efforts to strip the Lakota of their birthright. The pictures are beautiful; the circumstances are not. This



book is a wake-up call, for those who are unaware of or have not considered the historic and current issues of Indigenous Americans and the Oglala Lakota Tribe in particular.

In these photographs, the past exists in the present. There is barely a reference to the passage of time. Willis has mostly chosen not to date his pictures. He invites us into a world beyond time. He shows a deep interest in the influence of the landscape in shaping the lives and values of traditional and contemporary Lakota society. The first photograph in the book is of a lone house in a landscape that evokes the U.S. Farm Security Administration photographs from the 1930s. It is filled with desolation. The solitude of this photograph is followed by a sequence of affecting portraits of those Willis met on his first visit in 1992. Willis's documentation is fully aware of the pictorial exploitation of Indigenous Peoples that have preceded him. In 2000, Kevin Gover, the Assistant Secretary of Indian Affairs in the U.S. Department of the Interior and a member of the Pawnee Tribe of Oklahoma, officially apologized for 175 years of government mistreatment of Native Americans. After his list of government sanctioned, "destructive efforts to annihilate Indian cultures" he promises, "Never again will we allow unflattering and stereotypical images of Indian people to deface the halls of government or lead the American people to shallow and ignorant beliefs about Indians." Gover's entire speech is



included in *Views from the Reservation*. Also included are selections from the archives of cultural and family history from the Reddest family and Marian and Chubb White Mouse.

An unexpected treasure published in *Views from the Reservation* are

the Ledger Drawings by contemporary artist Dwayne Wilcox. He was born and raised on the Reservation and illustrates his people and their white interlopers with affection and humor, painting and drawing them on lined paper from the century old ledgers that white merchants used during their early transactions with the original Americans.

Views from the Reservation is filled with spiritual power and insightful observations. Many of the photographs have accompanying notation which supply welcome background material. Willis also contributes some excellent writing in the *Notes on Selected Plates, Opening Prayer, Closing Prayer, Artist's Statement, About the Craft, and Coda*. Plus, he has created a moving compilation of tribal music online. Photographer Linda Connor sums up the importance of Willis's effort on the book's back jacket, "John Willis's book looks to redefine a special place- the Pine Ridge Reservation—and, in doing so, he offers a new model for tackling the issues of place, community and history."

—Frank Ward