



# TURTLE ISLAND PRODUCTIONS

James M. Fortier • Writer/Producer/Director/DP

Turtle Island Production's owner/filmmaker James M. Fortier (Métis-Ojibway) has teamed up with Choctaw author/playwright/teacher/filmmaker LeAnne Howe to begin work on a new documentary chronicling the little-known world of All-Indian Men's Fast-Pitch Softball. Shooting for a sample "trailer" will begin over the Labor Day weekend in 2004 thanks to a seed grant from National Geographic's All Roads Film Project. The filmmakers will then submit the completed trailer and proposal to various foundations and funding sources to raise the necessary funds to finish principle photography during the August, 2005 unofficial national All-Indian Men's Fast-Pitch Softball championship tournament in Oklahoma.

Under the working title *Playing Pastime: American Indians, Softball, and Survival*, this verité-historical hybrid style documentary will chronicle the story of American Indians and their fifty-year history with fast-pitched softball. When most people think of fast-pitch softball, the last thing that comes to mind are American Indians. And when most people think of American Indians they imagine the whoop 'em up, war bonnet-wearing, hatchet-wielding stereotypes popular for generations in dime store pulp fiction, at the movies, and on television. Contrasting these misperceptions, this is the story of how modern day American Indians have adopted an American tradition as their own in an insightful and entertaining look at indigenous identity, the continuity of tradition, and cultural survival.

While the early 1890s saw renewed fighting between the US Cavalry and tribes on the Great Plains, (the massacre at Wounded Knee took place in December 1890), the American Indians in Indian Territory were forming dozens of baseball teams and battling it out on the prairie diamond. Tribal towns hosted weekly three-games series and played often 80 games per season through the long summer and early fall. The great legacy of Indian baseball teams lasted through Oklahoma statehood through the beginning of World War I. Then came the great influenza of 1918, the constant problems with the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, and finally WW II.

When the American Indian veterans came home after the war they once again began to rebuild their communities, which included restoring community sports. While baseball had gone the way of tribally held land, passing into private ownership, Indians continued to adapt- they switched to fast-pitch softball.

Since 1952, hundreds of American Indians have gathered in Oklahoma City each July under a sweltering summer sun for a weekend of family reunions, storytelling and the sharing of customs and traditions. A grand powwow? No! It's the annual fast-pitch, all-Indian softball tournament that decides the unofficial Indian national champion. The grueling tournament -- 600 players in 95 games on six adjoining fields -- began as a competition among Oklahoma Indians. Today, players and fans from dozens of tribes in the Western USA and Canada continue the modern tradition of fast-pitch softball. However, peel away the veneer of bats, balls, homeruns and frybread and you will discover a complex battle of ideas revolving around cultural assimilation, Native American stereotypes and traditionalism; even blood quantum -- striking at the heart of Indian identity. The tournament itself, once a venue where American Indians were able to express and celebrate their distinct cultures, has begun to reflect the many realities in modern America that are challenging the definitions of Indian self-identity and the survival of tribal cultures.

For American Indians the tournament has until recently been a constant in a time of rapid change in their culture. Since 1980, the reported population of Indians across the USA has soared by 67%, to 2.5 million, as tribes have relaxed tribal enrollment requirements to reflect unprecedented rates of intermarriages with members of other tribes and with non- Indians. The jump has increased the profile of

Indians nationwide but has taxed scarce resources by making more people eligible for tribal benefits. And it has raised a question expressed by many old timers: What is an Indian today? Two years ago, the tournament drew only 48 teams, the fewest in several years. The many campsites in the past that fed players and their families today are few. The "forty-nines," a distinctive mix of modern lyrics with traditional drumming and chants performed after games are on the decline compared to a decade ago. To fully understand the degree of change that is challenging the old truisms of Indian identity and culture all one need do is watch a game of fast-pitch Indian softball.

By chronicling this untold story linking two of America's nearly mythical pastimes, Indians and softball, this documentary will present an entertaining and compelling inside look at what it means to be an American Indian today. As American Indian filmmakers and storytellers, the production team and crew will have access to a little known and often misunderstood community of contemporary tribal people. By focusing on the challenges Native peoples face regarding cultural and tribal identities, this insider view will enable us to challenge a myriad of popular stereotypes, often negative, of American Indians.