

**As usual enough beginning:** a series of fiery speakers from all over the Americas, forms of oppression and struggle in the Americas, Moonanum James and Mahtowin officiating, this time anger from the speakers more evident than on some other Days of Mourning, and for the most part all that anger focused outward, on the system.

Given the past two years—1995 when people buried Plymouth Rock, 1996 when they interrupted and forced cancellation of the annual “Pilgrims Progress” parade which extols conventional notions of Thanksgiving—I, with many others I suppose, wondered, what next, how will we conclude this year? Dramatically, at the end of the speakout, Mahtowin suggested we take the streets—march! And off we went, without permit, without warning, without much preparation, but with a great deal of surprise.

I was caught off guard, not sure what might happen next, and probably the same for the police. An hour or so before the gathering, Jun-san, a Buddhist nun, walking from her pagoda in upstate New York, had arrived with four other walkers. She noticed the heavy police presence and said to us, “Very violent feeling, warrior Indians are here, we will walk and drum, maybe bring peace.” They walked around the town drumming and chanting.

When we arrived at the speakout site, the base of Massasoit’s statue, I noticed about 8 state police officers just down the hill, by the rock, next to 3 cruisers. No other police—until we began to walk. I was walking beside the front of the line, trying for pictures of the banner and the statue and the line of marchers (some 150 people, many of color, many children). Not much luck showing this combination. Plus I was at the end of a film roll, had to duck away for a moment to change film.

# National Day of Mourning

*Plymouth Massachusetts  
Thanksgiving Day, 1997*



Along with over 150 others, photographer Skip Schiel found himself caught in a melee one half mile from Plymouth Rock



Troopers guard Plymouth Rock



The speakout



Confronted by police while trying to march



Twenty five arrested

**The day** was cold, bright, extremely windy. Clouds raced across the sky, mottling the light, making shadows, highlights. After about one block walking, just coming up a small street onto the main section of town, as I was loading film, the marchers encountered a phalanx of police. The two lines faced off—a classic confrontation. I stood near the line of standoff, and waited.

Police pushed and shoved marchers. I couldn’t see clearly who was initiating, who was receiving. Police seemed to say, “Get off the street, stop the march,” while some marchers said, “Take the streets, this is our land.” At one moment curiously like that mysterious moment before the Wounded Knee massacre began, when soldiers were disarming Indians and someone raised a rifle, or a voice, and shooting began, police appeared to reach into the front line, grab someone, a man with long blond hair, extract him from the mass, throw him to the ground, subdue him with knees and arms and feet, pin his arms behind him, force his face to the asphalt, handcuff him, and hold him there a long time.

Long enough for me and many other photographers to show the scene. I was surprised at how much access I had to the action, felt ready to absorb a blow from police, or a command to get off the street. Police pulled others from the line, one at a time, seemingly going for the leaders, whether the leaders were exhorting marchers to stay in the street, or, like Sam Sapiel, a fairly gentle, mild and friendly elder, asking people to not confront the police, go to the sidewalk.

The police were in a sense well-prepared: some 60 officers, a joint force from Plymouth, the Sheriff’s Office, and the state, pinpointed wh they thought were leaders, separated them from the walkers, arrested, handcuffed and led them to vans.

**What registered** clearly for me as a vision was the rage on the faces of the police. They grimaced, bared teeth, puffed up bodies, glared with wide open eyes. Many of them, not all. Several remained calm. I stood before one man, I felt I needed to praise him, said, in the calmest voice I could muster, “You’re doing a good job (referring to him personally, his method of crowd control, not to his peers, brutalizing people), I admire your calm, this must be hard for you.” His reply: “Not hard at all, just part of the job.”

In contrast, pathos seemed a key emotion for the walkers. Many wept, worried aloud about others, often relatives and close friends, who’d disappeared. The Latinos and Latinas among the walkers might have recalled incidents in their countries when related events did result in the loss of loved ones. I heard some say, “We’ve got to get to the jail, the police will beat the prisoners.”

Walkers cried, yelled, continued to stay in the street. We came about one block further before being turned back. We returned to the statue. Children and visitors from other nations, bystanders, both living in Plymouth and touring for the day, many people of color, all witnessed this event. The weeping suggested one interpretation: police violence, brutality, fascism. Reportedly, later at the jail, a female Wampanoag Plymouth police officer said, “I was so ashamed of my fellow officers I feel like turning in my badge.”