



Wellbriety!

White Bison's Online Magazine

Volume 4, Number 2



Bill Iron Moccasin, Lakota



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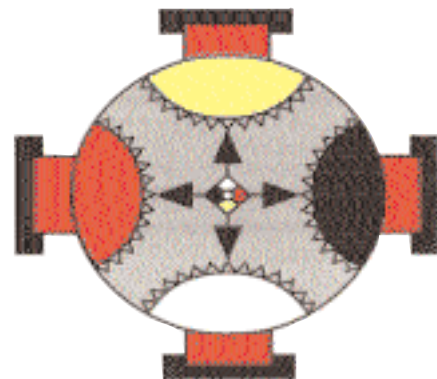
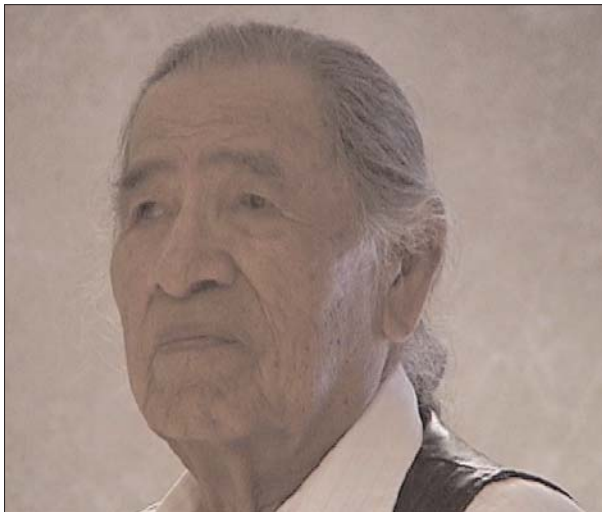
Lessons From the Old Culture: An Interview With Bill Iron Moccasin

Interviewed by Richard SimonelliPage 3

All those participating in **Hoop Journey IV—Healing Native Men and Children**—will watch a short video welcome given by Lakota Elder Bill Iron Moccasin at each of the 16 stops made by the Journey as it travels east of the Mississippi in April and May of 2003.

Bill Iron Moccasin is one of the original Sobriety Elders in the Native Wellbriety Movement. He has been an alcohol counselor and has served on many councils of Healing over the years. Some of his words appear in the new book, **The Red Road to Wellbriety**.

Bill served in the 101st Airborne Division of the US Army in WW 2 as a paratrooper. He saw action in Europe, where he went into combat. He currently lives in Sisseton, South Dakota with his wife Carole. Bill has two sons, eight grandchildren and four great grandchildren.



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Lessons From the Old Culture An Interview With Bill Iron Moccasin



Question

Bill, would you talk a little about how traditional culture cared for children?

Bill Iron Moccasin

Traditionally our whole society was designed to survive. Anything that could guarantee survival was a priority. All the adults took care of the children to see that they learned what they needed to learn in order to be productive. They also nurtured the talents that the children exhibited, whether they were hunters or trackers, arrow makers or bow makers. They all learned something. Everybody had a place in the society that was valuable to the society. The society was structured primarily about developing healthy children. Today they say it takes a whole village to raise a child. That was always a part of traditional life. Everybody was concerned about the children. If they were found doing something that was not proper it was corrected. There was a great deal of positive reinforcement. If you did something good they praised you for it. Today they have fancy names for that like "stroking" or positive reinforcement.

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I experienced all of this in my youth. My mother's parents died in an epidemic and another family raised her and her brother. So that family became relatives to the rest of us. I don't know anything about my mother's parents, but my father's parents were living up until I was 15. And they lived the old culture. Our

reservation wasn't established formally until 1890. It wasn't too long after the Battle of Little Big Horn. So my grandparents lived in the old culture and by the values they had to live by.



Question

What would be some examples of how adults related to children?

Bill Iron Moccasin

If I did something I wasn't supposed to do I was corrected. I was told what was proper and what wasn't. My grandfather died when I

was six so I had some good experiences with him. In those old ways the responsibility for adults was to every child in the community. The idea today that no child should be left behind was part of the old culture. No child was ever left behind. We want to revive that. We don't have too much information out to communities today about what the responsibilities were in the old culture.

For example, there was a lot of mentoring going on. If I saw some youngster who was interested in what I was doing, or in what my skills were, I would try to teach him everything that I knew. When we grow up we have something that we want to be. Today it's finding a vocation. That same thing existed in the past in our culture. We had certain needs that required certain skills. We had arrow making, and what kind of wood to pick for bows. This system was there right from early childhood. You learned the things that you needed to know as you grew up from the older men.

Traditional men's societies offered a kind of spon-

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sorship to boys. If they wanted to join a society they had to go through certain kinds of rites of passage. They were accepted into the society. This began about the age of puberty. Both boys and girls were usually with their mothers until the age of puberty. Then they split up and the girls learned from the older women. The girls learned what they needed to know in order to be a good mother or wife. The boys learned everything they needed to know in order to be a good husband or a good provider. As they grew up the boys went over to the men folks and the girls went over to the women.

Adults had a continued responsibility to the youth. At my age now, and I'm 85, I still pass on the positive things I know to the younger people. Some of these are the principles of behavior, honesty, respect, generosity, kindness—all those things. Our traditional culture was a "one for all and all for one" culture. "Principles before personalities" was a way of life.



Question

We understand that you teach Dakota and Lakota language. What role does traditional language play in healing?

Traditional men's societies offered a kind of sponsorship to boys. If they wanted to join a society they had to go through certain kinds of rites of passage. They were accepted into the society. The boys learned everything they needed to know in order to be a good husband or a good provider. As they grew up the boys went over to the men folks and the girls went over to the women.



Bill Iron Moccasin

Today I help people speak our traditional language. We have a problem today because some of the fluent speakers make fun of those that can't speak the language. We have to try to change that attitude. A lot of our songs and the things we do are of the language. We have to make it be a thing of pride to even be a partial speaker. I work with the Head Start kids to teach them the language. Every language is learned right at the early ages. Experts will tell you that between infancy and 9 or 10 years of age are the years where you can learn the language a lot easier. I help them to pronounce the words correctly at that age, where their parents can't do this. We teach both youngsters and their parents. I teach at Head Start as well as help at Sisseton-Wahpeton Tribal College where some of the parents of the youngsters are in the classes. We are trying to get a continuum between the classes and the home. I help teach Dakota language 1 & 2. We also teach culture and the history.

Question

What is one of the traditional ways of the old culture that could help bring together Native men and children?

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Bill Iron Moccasin

If we look at something that all Indian communities have in common all across Indian country, that would be the substance abuse problem. It's the root cause of just about all of our problems because it makes us forget our culture, reasoning and our judgment. Yet we have a resource in our communities that was a very viable part of the old culture, and that was the warrior societies. They had primary commitments. One was to help the widows. Another was to help the orphans. A third one was to help those who were handicapped—whether physically, old age, or if they just couldn't support themselves so they could live in comfort. A fourth one was to bring honor to the society. Those are the four things that are desperately needed in our society. Anyone who accepts the identity of a warrior, today we call them veterans, should accept these responsibilities along with the identity.

The single largest undeveloped, underutilized resource we have across Indian country are our veterans. We should be willing to give of our time and sponsor youngsters. We can take them fishing or hunting or camping. These were the roles of the men folk, way back in the old culture. This would be a good place for the men and children to come together. We have a lot of single parent women who for all practical purposes could be considered widows because the male is not in the household and the children have no male father image.

Even if many Indian cultures have lost their connections to their own warrior societies, we all have the veterans we can be proud of. As Native Americans we have the highest participation of any ethnic group in the United States on a per capita basis as far as defending the country. It's a matter of record. That's something we can bring out in any Indian community. In order to be proud of that, we need to go another step because we are still fighting for survival. In order to survive and get back our cultural identity we need to look at these things our ancestors developed that are still just as important

today. Cultural preservation has to be our primary goal so that our descendents will have an identity culture and history that they can be proud of and which in turn will foster self-esteem.

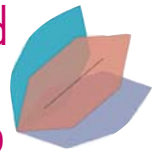
Question

Would you speak a little about child abuse?

Bill Iron Moccasin

Child abuse was not a part of our culture. We never physically punished a child. It was all done by shaming. That's something we've gotten away from. For example, in alcohol abuse we hear the excuse, "If I wasn't drinking I wouldn't have done that." I've been an alcohol counselor for more years than I care to remember and that is always one of the excuses I heard. "I wouldn't have done that if I wasn't drinking." So the traditional culture used a kind of positive shaming that started from infancy. One of the biggest no no's was you don't bring shame to the family. We were all conscious of that and were made to understand that from the time we were small. That was one of the things we didn't do. We have a word in Lakota that means "shameful." It's almost like being a thief. Shaming was the deterrent we used to keep people from doing negative things. You didn't bring shame to the family so you didn't do anything that was going to be shameful, or we consid-

Our culture was a children-oriented society in order to develop a society that would survive. That had to come with developing your resources. The resources were the children. This coming Hoop Journey can help both men and children to find each other. We can accomplish this by revitalizing the great social systems our ancestors developed and lived by.



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ered shameful. That would reflect on your family right away. Our traditional cultures were honor-based cultures.

Question

You said that substance abuse is a common problem all Indian communities have. What do you think causes this?

Bill Iron Moccasin

I've thought for many years trying to figure out why some of our alcoholic behavior happened. When they put our people on reservations and took away the opportunity for men to gain respect, honor and bravery for deeds, some of this behavior began. My father's generation was the first generation on a reservation. My grandfather lived by the old culture and had a chance to win honors and things like that. But in my dad's generation it was against the law for Indians to drink or for anybody to even give it to them or buy it for them.

I think a lot of people drank just to defy the law. My dad used to say, "You've got to drink to be a man." We defied the white man. It became a kind of status symbol to drink and to be able to defy the law of the white man. It was considered honorable as far as our society is concerned. It showed bravery. You risked jail. If you got caught drinking you'd go to jail. I've thought about why Indians drank over the years. There was a reason why we drank. We've never really presented this kind of an idea about our early drinking. So it wasn't just despair that caused us to start drinking. There was some element in it that brought recognition or prestige, or something like this to the guy that drank. But then it developed into a problem.

We have a lot of problems which we can't address. In treatment terms, we "stuff them." Eventually we get to a point where we start climbing the walls. Alcohol reduces our inhibitions. So when we drink, all of what is stuffed comes out. It's kind of a mental catharsis. A mental house cleaning. Psychologically, anyway. To get it out of our system we'll even fight each other.

When I was working in the Veteran's administration, many of our people tested out as being passive-aggressive on those inventory tests. Passive when we are sober and aggressive when we are drinking. All that anger came out and we had to strike out at something. It wasn't that way in the old culture. It was something that happened when the reservation system came in due to the suppression and control. My grandmother used to tell me that they had to have permission to leave the reservation. They had to have a card, almost like a passport.

If we could ever get the veterans in our society to bring back the rule of the warrior societies we would use an untapped resource. We'll always have a lot of our people going into the service. I'm trying to revive an organization we tried to get started 25 years ago. That's the Native American Veteran's Association.



Question

Would you talk a little about some of the solutions you see for the challenges faced by Native communities in the future?

Bill Iron Moccasin

If we look into our culture we have a lot of the answers. The Red Road to Wellbriety book brings this out. I think we have to go to the leadership and talk about this. The only thing that has changed for us is the environment. The need to survive is still here. We need to learn how to survive in today's environment. We need to educate our youngsters, we need to deal with our substance abuse problems because they create domestic violence, child abuse, fetal alcohol children, and all these things.

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But if we could ever get the veterans in our society to bring back the rule of the warrior societies we would use an untapped resource. We'll always have a lot of our people going into the service. I'm trying to revive an organization we tried to get started 25 years ago. That's the Native American Veteran's Association. We have a lot of peacetime veterans who were not in the service in a combat era. We want to develop an organization for all veterans with an honorable discharge, whether they were in peacetime or a combat era. We have veteran's organizations in just about every tribe across the country, but we're fragmented. We don't have a national organization. We need to organize nationally as a Native American Veteran's Association for men and women. It would be for anybody with an honorable discharge.

In the old society there were two categories of warrior society members. If you went into combat

you were called a "combat man." In the other category you could be a member of the society and never go on the warpath. In that case you helped the orphans and widows and whoever else needed help. The old warrior societies were made up of men. But there were also women who would go fight if their brother or other man in their life got killed.

Our culture was a children-oriented society in order to develop a society that would survive. That had to come with developing your resources. The resources were the children. This coming Hoop Journey can help both men and children to find each other. We can accomplish this by revitalizing the great social systems our ancestors developed and lived by. ✚

