



# Wellbriety!

*White Bison's Online Magazine*

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## Native American Resistance to Alcohol Since First Contact *Part 2 of Bill White's Talk Inside*



*Cover Photo*

*Noted authors Anne Wilson Schaefer (L), and Margaret J. Wheatley met for the first time at the Conference. Both women contributed to the Conference with workshop presentations and a keynote.*



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# White Bison Speaks

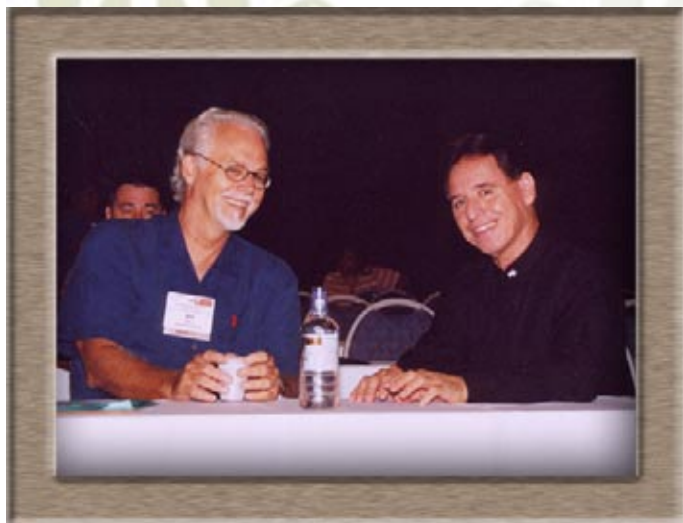
## Native American Resistance to Alcohol Since First Contact

A Talk by William L. White, M.A.

Given at the Fourth Annual Circles of Recovery Conference

Albuquerque, New Mexico, September 19, 2003

Part 2 of 2 Parts



Bill White (L) and Henry Lozano visit at the Conference

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Part 1 of the talk can be found in Volume 4, #23 of *Wellbriety! Magazine*

### **The First Circles**

New abstinence-based recovery circles emerged out of the visions of Native people who resisted the effects of alcohol on their tribes in the historic era. I want to highlight some of those for you, and give you a flavor of how rich this early history is. There may be earlier examples, but as far as Don and I have pushed this history back, right now it is to the 1730's among the Delaware Indians. The earliest recovery circles, and they were referred to as circles, were organized by a prophetess by the name of Wyoming Woman who began to castigate alcohol and began to articulate alcohol as a vehicle of destruction of Native cultures.

She called on the Delaware to abstain from all alcohol and reject all other trappings of European culture.

That movement is followed very quickly by other prophets by the names of Papoonan, Wangomen, and perhaps most significantly, Neolin, in 1755. He probably has the most fully organized sobriety based support structure for people in recovery from alcoholism in this early period.

As we move forward we get to the late 1700's and perhaps a kind of archetype of these movements is that of the Handsome Lake movement. Handsome Lake was born in 1735 among the Turtle Clan of the Seneca Indians in what is now the State of New York. To be honest, he lived an absolute degenerate and debauched life. At the age of 65, in 1799, he is filled with bitterness and resentment towards his family and his tribe. He is in the midst of a long, extended binge on trade whiskey, like a thousand others that he's been through, and it seemed that at this point in time he had actually died. His body became cold and he stopped breathing. Hours later as the preparations were beginning for his funeral, he suddenly awoke and announced that he had died and gone to the Creator and that the Creator had instructed him and sent him back with a message for Native people.

This is a person being sent back who has no credibility within his tribe. This is a person sent back who has no history of leadership. And yet, when he awakes from this drunken binge, awakes from this death-like experience, and when he awakes, the message that he will give will take 125 pages to record when it is finally recorded in 1913.

I would like to give you a very brief piece of this. These are some of the first core words from what is going to become the Code of Handsome Lake that will be the first and probably one of the most fully organized abstinence-based frameworks of recovery—what will evolve into the Longhouse religion. Here are the words from the Code of Handsome Lake.

He says, "The first word is One'ga," which is really the term for whiskey or rum. "This word stands for a great and

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*This is Part 2 of the talk William L. White gave at the Fourth Annual Circles of Recovery Conference in Albuquerque, New Mexico in 2003. This is not only a talk about history way back there in time. In this talk, Don Coyhis and Bill White invite all those who would like to contribute to the book being written to get in touch. White says, "Don and I would like to invite you to be our co-authors in this research. We know there are many missing pieces of this history. We know that some of those will be captured in oral tribal history. We are going to try to find ways to get rough drafts of this book we are working on out to you for your review and comments. We want you to tell us what's missing and to tell us the modern stories that also need to be included."*

*Please get in touch with White Bison if you can bring the story of the Indian sobriety movement from the days after World II up to the present. Please get in touch if you are willing to share anything from your own experience or your tribal tradition that relates to resistance to, and recovery from alcohol in your own tribal ways. We want you to be part of this book. We need your contribution to make this book a living and true history of healing.*

*Contact White Bison by e mail at [info@whitebison.org](mailto:info@whitebison.org) or call toll-free at 1-877-871-1495 to make contact.*

monstrous evil and has reared a high mound of bones. You lose your minds, and Onega causes it all. Many are too fond of it, so all must say, I will use it nevermore as long as I live, as long as the number of my days is, I will never use it again. I now stop." That was in 1799 and Handsome Lake, to the best of all the records, will never take another drink. He will go on to promote the Code of Handsome

Lake, organizing quarterly meetings, and quarterly recovery circles, where people come together for dancing, singing, and fasting. We also have some hints of an early story style, a story style of sharing, that is a little bit different from our contemporary story style. This story style says, "This is the way it was, This is what Happened, and This is the Way it is." But this story style is not about an individual, it's about the tribe.

The story style says this is what our life was like in the tribe before One'ga came to the tribe. This is what One'ga did and what happened in the crisis that turned it around. And this is what life is like in the tribe, now that we've sworn to sobriety and a return to Native ways.

Another thing that was typical of the Handsome Lake Movement that marked other movements, was that this movement was more than something that simply said stop drinking because it's destructive, it's a pattern of self-genocide if we continue. It is actually an extremely well-articulated moral code for living. In addition to demanding abstinence, the Code also attacked vainness, boasting, gossip, gambling, sexual promiscuity, and violence towards women and children. At the same time, the Code extolled the virtue of living in community, caring for the elderly and the poor, and the value of generosity. Many of the following movements continued from that period to today.

### *Indian Preachers, Prophets, and Movements*

Next in history we have a period of the Indian Preachers, Native Americans who converted to Christianity and then virtually became evangelists, carrying a message, not only of Christian conversion, but a message of alcoholism recovery based on they themselves having recovered through the vehicle of Christian conversion. They include Individuals like Samson Occom and William Apess in the late 1700's and the early 1830's. William Apess is perhaps significant because his autobiography, published in 1827, called *The Son of the Forest*, is the first Native American biography we have published, but it's also two things. It is the first Native American biography of alcoholism we have. Apess

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was raised by alcoholic grandparents. The vivid detail he portrays of his experience, and the chaos, and violence of this alcoholic family, probably marks the beginning of the Children of Alcoholism literature in America, if not the world.

Oocom and Apess are going to become missionaries who travel from tribe to tribe, bringing this abstinence-based message framed within a Christian framework. As the American Temperance Movement rises, we will have temperance missionaries, and we will have Native American temperance societies. George Copway is an example. Copway spent much of his later life traveling from tribe to tribe organizing temperance societies. I have to admit that when I first read the details of his life I had to say, "That is what Don does these days!"

There was also the Cherokee Temperance Society that became very well known for their ability to sober up almost entire tribes for extended periods of time. Then those tribes came under physical and cultural assault and those societies collapsed.

There are additional prophet movements. There is the Shawnee Prophet Movement that occurs between 1805 and 1811. This arose from a near-death experience in which someone appeared to have died, and 24 hours later awakes with the message. And the message is that Native people must reject alcohol and all other European trappings, returning to Native traditions. We have the Kickapoo prophet of the 1830's who sobered up not only a large number of the Kickapoo, but also a number of the surrounding tribes. After this, as we move into the late 1800's, we begin to get Nativist religious movements, including the Indian Shaker Church. We get the peyotism of the 1870's spreading from Mexico that formalizes in the organization of the Native American Church in 1918. We also see other movements and ceremonies specifically organized by someone out of a crisis of alcoholism that will play a role in initiating or strengthening sobriety for many. These include the Ghost Dance Movement, and traditions like the Sun Dance, Gourd Dance, and the Sweat lodge.

These movements and traditions provided a number of key things. They provided a Nativist rationale for radical abstinence from alcohol. They framed the context of abstinence not only in personal terms, but it was really about survival of the people. They framed the act of abstinence as a political as well as a personal act. They built in the fact that sobriety was a representation of Indianness. They built in rituals of grieving related to personal and tribal losses. They built in value systems like the Red Road, the Peyote Way, and the Code of Handsome Lake. They also built in models for community action and resistance against alcohol.

To summarize, alcohol recovery is a living reality in Native communities and has been for more than 250 years.

### *Become Visible in Recovery!*

Now there is a larger recovery advocacy movement in the United States, and we, as that larger movement are saying that the ravages of alcoholism and addiction are unbelievably visible in all of our communities. Unfortunately, recovery becomes virtually invisible. When people go back to jail for their umpteenth time, that is incredibly visible. The person who, through recovery and sobriety, drops out of that visibility and becomes unseen within the society, is invisible. One of the things that the recovery advocacy movement is saying to all of us is this: *It is time that a vanguard of recovering people and their families stood up in this culture and announced our presence.*

The movement is saying that everyone in this society knows somebody in recovery. The problem is, they don't know they are in recovery. For example, attitudes towards cancer and the kind of stigma attached to conditions like cancer did not change in this culture until we reached critical mass where everybody knew somebody in recovery from cancer. They knew somebody who survived cancer and had done so for five years. We are arguing out of this new recovery advocacy movement that the same is true for alcoholism. We need to begin to offer ourselves as living proof to this culture that there are permanent solutions to alcoholism and drug addiction. We need to do that, in particular, in Native communities where the story of resistance and the story of

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resilience and recovery has been suppressed for so long.

I think it is also time to give credit to Native communities where that credit is due. The very birth of the idea of the Wounded Healer, the notion that somebody has survived an experience or condition and who may offer something special in the healing of others experiencing that condition, comes from within Native culture. It's time we began to credit Native America for their role in the history of sobriety-based support structures.

This is not an aged, musty history. The history of recovery, the history of resilience, the history of the resistance I am describing is very much alive today. It is alive in the continuity of those earlier movements. It is alive in the Native American Church today, in the Indian Shaker Church, and in the Longhouse religions. It is vibrantly alive in the current Wellbriety Movement. It is evident with the rise of AA within Native communities following the Second World War, and the growing Indianization AA, NA and Alanon in those communities.

There are new recovery-based cultural and religious revitalization movements popping up around the country, with the Wellbriety Movement being the connecting tissue for those movements. The most effective and enduring solutions to Native alcohol problems have for more than 300 years come from within those communities. Efforts to solve these problems from outside Native communities have inadvertently contributed to the very hopelessness out of which alcohol problems in those communities thrive. Historically, the solutions emerge out of the very heart of Native culture. The community IS the treatment center. We will help heal those cultures so there is no space for alcohol and drug problems, nor interpersonal violence within those cultures. The history of resistance and recovery within Native American tribes is a testimony of cultural forces of prevention and healing that continue to constitute powerful but underutilized forces in the resolution of alcohol and other drug problems.

### *An Invitation to Healing and History*

Don and I would like to invite you to be our co-authors in this research. We know there are many missing pieces of

this history. We know that some of those will be captured in oral tribal history. We are going to try to find ways to get rough drafts of this book we are working on out to you for your review and comments. We want you to tell us what's missing and to tell us the modern stories that also need to be included. It's not enough to talk about the Native American Church of 1918—we need to talk about a recovery story in 2003 of someone in the Native American Church.

One of the most significant movements that shaped my own life was the American Civil Rights Movement. The story that I heard in 1965, which had occurred a couple of years earlier, went like this. It takes place during one of the first early civil rights marches as they prepared to march against a federal restraining order. It takes place as they faced the march and the violation of that order. They went into the streets and began to march. Then, as they turned a corner and faced a bridge and a sea of police dogs and baton-slapping police officers, the entire march froze. They froze almost in silence as every person began to visualize what could unfold within the coming seconds and minutes.

At that point one of the oldest men in the group, very quietly and with dignity simply said, "Let's go make some history." The group unfroze and marched forward into history.

We are attempting to assemble much of the lost history of resistance and recovery. But the future chapters of this book Don and I are working on are really left to be written with your lives. As we leave here I would charge you with the mission, *Let's go make some history.*

As I leave today I leave you my heart. I leave you the very warmest regards and respect from the larger recovery advocacy movement around this country. And I leave you the challenge to go forward and write this future with your lives. ✚

Thank you!