



# Wellbriety!

*White Bison's Online Magazine*

Volume 5, Number 6

## Honoring Bill Iron Moccasin

Elders Panel #2, September 20, 2003



Bill Iron Moccasin, Lakota, made the Journey to the Spirit World in February, 2004. What better way to honor and thank Bill and his family for all they've given to Native American sobriety, addictions recovery, and the Wellbriety Movement than by presenting his final teaching to us, given with his brothers, at the Circles of Recovery Conference on September 20, 2003. Bill, we'll miss you.



Published by White Bison, Inc.  
Colorado Springs, CO



# White Bison Speaks

## The Second Elder's Panel

White Bison Conference, Albuquerque, New Mexico

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*Bill Iron Moccasin, Lakota, (center), Horace Axtell, Nez Perce, (left) and Ozzie Williamson, Blackfeet, (right) lead the second Elder's Panel at the White Bison Conference in 2003*

### Question

There is a lot of gossip in our communities and it is very destructive. It creates feuds and separation within the community. A lot of violence stems from that. Then, it is passed onto the children and the children start acting out. How would you, the Elders, in the traditional way try and solve the conflict in the community and have peace again?

### Bill Iron Moccasin

Our ancestors were very smart. They knew psychology. They knew human behavior and what motivated people. They came up with solutions. They had a group of Elders in the tribal community whose purpose was to resolve domestic problems within their society. Our ancestors knew if you had a society that was functioning well it was a safe society. But if you started having dissension among the people, that had to be corrected. The spiritual leaders, and maybe the headman himself would counsel the people and there would be decisions made and something like a sentence passed on disruptive people. Certain people would be asked to do this or to do that in order to keep peace in the family or the larger family. If they didn't do what they were asked, there were consequences. Our ances-

tors were pretty good at choices and consequences. Our system worked.

For example, if two families were arguing and one family didn't want to resolve the issue, the warrior societies, which were fellowships of men of good character, might go and slash the their tipi. That was a warning. If the family still violated the rules, their tipi would be torn down. Today, first we have a verbal reprimand, then a letter, and then someone might get booted out. Now they call it due process.

Our ancestors also had due process. Verbal orders were first given to cease and desist. If they didn't do that, then came the slashing of the tipi as another warning. That was like the written letter. Then the person or family might be asked to leave. Their tipi would be dragged out of the camp circle. I wouldn't want my tent slashed or dragged out of the camp circle so I had better shape up.

### Horace Axtell

I'm a Nez Perce and our way of life goes back a long ways. The question you asked was about how gossip and

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other things were handled in the old ways. Our way of life teaches us about loving one another. That's one of our main points. It also teaches us to respect our Elders and to correct our children. There are other factors along with that. We are supposed to honor one another. All these things were practiced all the time, from the time the sun came up and until the sun went down. Some of the disruptions in society that you asked about hardly happened in our way a long time ago. I learned from the Elders who



didn't know how to speak English, or read or write, that most of these problems came to light when the missionaries came. The missionaries told our people that what we were practicing and what we called our way of life was heathenism. People called us heathens. That made quite a commotion amongst the people. We are still being called heathens or devil worshippers today. But I still practice our old way and I will until my time comes.

Sometimes I have to talk to disruptive people in the Longhouse, where I am the leader. I tell them, "If you want to talk like that, go someplace else. Don't bring it in here." That's the best way I can answer that.

### Ozzie Williamson

When I was a child on my reservation I was taught to respect all Elders regardless of who they are. In the community I grew up in, I really didn't know who my maternal grandparents were because every Elder in that community was a grandfather or a grandmother. The middle-aged peo-

ple were uncles and aunts. It didn't matter who they were. If you did something wrong they corrected you, and your parents would never say a word. They supported what they did. We were taught to respect all Elders. Thinking back, I saw changes made on my reservation in the middle nineteen forties after the Second World War when a lot of the guys were coming home. That's when the alcohol started on the reservation a lot heavier than it ever was. I think alcohol has probably been the most destructive thing that Indians have ever been in contact with. It has destroyed the decent way of life for all of us.

I look back to how I was raised, and how I raised my kids. There was no comparison. Today I feel sorry for the younger parents because they don't dare correct their kids any more. Some of the kids know that if you correct them they will call 911. Who's going to pay for it? Not the kids but the parents. I think that's where a lot of the gossip starts. Once gossip starts it doesn't stop. But how do you stop it today? I don't know. I used to always tell my kids and people I worked with that there are three words I don't want to hear. They are, "Did you hear...?" Usually that's a sign of gossip. Back in the older days the discipline that they had in the tribe really worked. In my tribe if a woman was unfaithful it wasn't long before everyone knew it because they clipped the end of her nose off and she was gone from the tribe. If they did that to women nowadays, I wonder how many women would be running around with no nose?

I think gossip is probably the most destructive thing there is in Indian country, but how we are going to stop it I don't know. Gossip keeps a lot of people from going to treatment and I think it keeps a lot of people from doing a lot of other healthy things too. When I was a child we were taught that you don't talk about other people. If you are going to say something bad about them, you just don't say it. I think we've lost that. Gossip comes from lack of respect I and I think we've lost teaching respect.

### Bill Iron Moccasin

When I grew up we never got hit. We never physically corrected our children. There was a word we always heard,

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and in English it means “shameful.” We didn’t do anything to bring shame to the family name. Whatever you did reflected on your family. I tell the youngsters that your public behavior reflects on your parents. If you misbehave it means you are not being properly fetched-up by your parents. That is how they controlled a lot of the behavior. When I grew up I didn’t dare bring shame, especially to my grandmother. That’s what kept us in line as we grew up. As Ozzie said, if you correct somebody else’s kid today you’ve got a fight on your hands. In the old days we didn’t need this kind of law because we didn’t physically abuse our children. But today in the other culture, they used to live by “spare the rod and spoil the child,” which the missionaries brought to us also. A lot of us experienced that in boarding school when we were punished. A lot of our younger people haven’t had that boarding school experience. We were whipped for things we were not supposed to do. It’s a learned behavior. If you are an abuser, your children will be abusers. If you abuse your children, they will be abusers. That’s passed on from one generation to another. Our parents went to boarding school and passed it on to us. The disciplinarian I went to school under was a graduate of Carlisle. He was one of the meanest guys I ever met. He would really bat us around and he was a Native American. He did it to us because that’s how they treated him at Carlisle Indian School. This kind of behavior is not part of our culture. It’s a learned behavior from the other society, the other culture.

### Horace Axtell

Way back in time, like in the 1800’s, our people only spoke one language in my tribe. There was no English. When we use our own language with respect, these kinds of words don’t come about. When we gathered up these English words, they can run the mouth real bad sometimes. Back in the old times when people only spoke their own language there was respect spoken right there. There are quite a few words that people use in English that we don’t have in our Nez Perce language. Our words were given to us by the Creator and they are to be used in a respectful way. That’s my understanding.



### Question

I work with the young people. The concern I have that they brought to me is this. When I direct them to the Elders in our community or in our neighboring tribal community the comment that we hear is “I’m only going to say this once.” I heard it when I was growing up also. I remember while growing up that I had to sit there and be quiet, not to let my mind wander, and really, really listen with my whole body, when I talked to an Elder. I know times are changing, and I don’t want to teach the kids to be disrespectful, because you all are very respectful men and Elders in your communities. But I always hear that phrase and it has scared some of the young men. When I try to direct them back, and they say, “He said he was going to only say this once.” I can hear that in a real positive way. But I’m asking for some direction to take home. What can you say when the Elders say, “I’m only going to say this once?”

### Bill Iron Moccasin

And that’s what we mean! (Much laughter)

### Question

With all due respect, that’s not reaching the kids when they have fear of going back.

### Bill Iron Moccasin

We have to admit that our culture is not as intact as it used to be. We don’t do the things as parents or grandparents that we should do. Either we got brainwashed or assimilated. Sometimes we call each other an Apple, red on the outside, white on the inside. I’ve seen changes come about with everybody that I grew up with when we were kids running around barefooted and raggedy pants, talking nothing but Dakota and Lakota. Then pretty soon we went to school and they told us you’ve got to be like a white man, so we buy into it and then we want to be like them. Some of us change but some of us don’t change. So we are kind of a mixed society now. It all depends on what



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degree of acculturation you're at. When I lecture, I do a chart. I say, down here you are totally traditional but then you go up this ladder of acculturation and eventually you are almost totally assimilated. You're more comfortable in white society than you are in your own society. There are some of us who are probably half way up the incline. We still speak the language and we still follow some of the traditional practices, but we can also function pretty well in the dominant society. There is a crossing back and forth in a lot of us. I probably fit that category because I carry a Pipe, I do sweat lodges, I speak the language. I speak three different types of English. One is English for my friends on the street, one is everyday language, and then one is when I use the big jawbreakers, like when I'm talking to people who have a higher academic level. I used to lecture in college and I'd use some pretty good words. Instead of saying "sweat" I'd say perspire just to impress somebody. That's part of reality for us today.

We'd like to be able to redesign our culture. Our ancestors developed a social system that we will never see the equal of on this continent again. We had no need for courts, judges, jails, or the welfare system. We had spiritual philosophy and medicine. I've told people that the only thing that the European brought over here that improved our way of life was the horse. It improved our way of transportation and hunting abilities. We could do everything else. We could make our own clothes, preserve our own food, doctor each other and take care of ourselves healthwise—we had it all. One lady took issue with what I said. She said we should appreciate these modern conveniences. I just want to give you an idea of what we face today, like taking an inventory of yourself. Ask yourself, "Where am I at in this acculturation process? Am I half way up the ladder, or am I more in the assimilated area? Or am I still more traditional than I am assimilated?"

### Horace Axtell

Getting back to the question about "I'm only going to say this once." (Much laughter) The truth is, in my tribe we had a whip man and a whip woman. There were times when I was a boy playing with others, I can remember a

time two boys got into a fight over a cap gun. An adult came along and he took us all up to the whip man. So we had to line up. They didn't want us to have to hear somebody say, "I'm only going to say this once." That stopped it right there. They only had to say it one time because of discipline. They always lined us up with the smallest guy first. That was a big lesson. After that, if we were playing, we would jump on these two guys who were really arguing and say, "Hey! Cut that out. You're going to get us all whipped." So most of the time when somebody told us something it was one time. We had to understand that.



I've also heard that when some person was correcting their young one they would say, "I'm not going to keep telling you this until my mouth gets crooked." They would say that in Indian and it sounds pretty strong. These are the things I understand about only saying it once. When I got into the service our commander would get up there and tell us about something and he would say, "I told you once, but I'm going to have to tell you again." Things have changed.

### Ozzie Williamson

I was thinking of the question when my brothers here were talking. One thing I know for sure is that we can never go back to the old ways. But we can still use a lot of the old ways. One of the things that is not being done, that had to be done in the home I grew up in, is that at supper-time everybody had to be home. Everybody had to be at the supper table, which was a round table. What everybody

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had to say was important. We were all taught to listen to that person. One person spoke at one time. That's what's being lost and that's where a lot of that comes from. "I'm only going to tell you once." That's new. That came from the white man. That didn't come from the Indian people. Indian people didn't talk that way. I'd say it still goes back to respect. A lot of our kids aren't taught respect like we were. A child that grows up in a house that is respectful—you'll never hear him talking back. You don't hear him gossiping and you never hear of him getting into trouble. There are a lot of changes and I know we can't go back, but we can use a lot of the old ways. I go back and I like to use that word respect. If you teach the respect that we were taught, then you don't have a lot of the problems we are experiencing today.



### Question

One of the concerns I've noticed within my community is the division among our Elders. My mother, who is an Elder, no longer wants to participate with the activities that are offered to our Elders because the younger ones are coming in now and she feels like they are stealing the show. She feels the activities are geared to them. How do we fix that? I thought maybe we should have activities for our older Elders and have activities for our younger Elders so the older Elders don't feel left out. The director of the Center said we are just making the division even bigger by doing that. I don't want to lose the wisdom of these Elders because they feel like they no longer belong in our society. How do we heal that part so that all of our Elders feel like they belong in our society?

### Bill Iron Moccasin

Today, when you reach the age of 55 you're considered an Elder. At the age of 55 I considered myself a fairly young man. A lot of our Indian politicians talk about youth and Elders today. They say we've got to do something for the youth, and then we have to do something for the Elders because they're the ones who have all the wis-

dom and brought us to this point. But it isn't happening. I agree with the question. Once you get to be an elder Elder, or an older Elder, then you are kind of warehoused. That's something that's been happening in the dominant society. Some of the older people could function very well in a community or especially in a household, but they put them in retirement homes. We haven't really done that to the degree that the dominant society is doing that, but were still ignoring the older Elders. I think that's a good question that he posed.

I'm an older veteran in the community I live in. I'm an Elder in the Kit Fox Society. Sometimes the younger ones have me come along as a token. We are kind of token members of our society. That gentleman is correct, this is happening. Just take a look around in your own communities.

### Horace Axtell

That's why they make coins. To try to remember us guys. I still go back to my language again. Even at my age, I'm 79, I don't have anybody to go to anymore. So people come to me and ask me questions. I had an Elder I used to go to but he went to the happy land a few years back. He lived far away. He lived in the Colville tribe but he was Nez Perce. He told me, "Any time you want to ask me anything, you call me up. I have a phone right by my bed." All the time we spoke, we spoke our language. I think we lost a lot of things when we lost our language. A lot of places have lost their language. As long as you can communicate in the language the Creator gave us, the first thing we learn is to respect our Elders. I learned that when I was a little guy and I still do that. But it's a little different now when I am an Elder and have no one else to ask. I lost three Elders in the last three months. The important thing is that we've got to help our Elders any way we can to uphold the old teachings of our ways. It's a really good question that was asked.

### Ozzie Williamson

I don't live on my reservation any longer. But in the community that I live in there is a program that I really



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like. They've tried to match some of the Elders with kids in the community who don't have any grandparents. It's kind of a foster grandparent program. It really seems to be working well. It gives the grandparent a good feeling of being able to give something to their child. I think things like that could be considered instead of just letting them feel left out. If you could get several of the older people involved with some of the younger kids that really need the help. Kids who have drinking parents, where they can't go to their parents and get the guidance that they need, could find it through these Elders.



### Question

I wanted to get back to my sister's question about "I'm only going to say this once." You answered it beautifully when you talked about respect and discipline, "I'm only going to tell you this once." But just imagine I'm a 40 year old woman, and I am on the Red Road but I have fallen on that path, and I've fallen in my spirituality somehow, or I've fallen out of integrity, and I go to my sister and ask her for help and she says, "Go see an Elder." So I come to see you, Ozzie, and you say I'm going to tell you this once, and you give me some wisdom, and you give me some guidance that lasts me about 2 months, and then I fall again. So I go to my sister again and I say I need help, and she says go back to the Elder and I say, "No, he told me he was only going to tell me this once." Can a person truly come back to an Elder a second time with the same problem? A lot of people, when they hear, "I'm only going to tell you this once," won't come back a second time with the same problem out of shame. So could you answer more from the adult aspect?

### Bill Iron Moccasin

I think that term, "I'm only going to tell you once" isn't in our vocabulary that I remember. My Elders were there for me to seek guidance at whatever time I needed it. Or they were there to correct me. That was part of their responsibility. If somebody tells you, "I'm only going to tell you once" he's talking from a dominant society perspective,

not a Native American perspective. You can go back to an Elder. If you were my granddaughter and you came to me, my responsibility is to try to guide you. If you came to me again, I'm there as a grandfather. Part of my responsibility as an Elder is to try to help the younger people. That was our role in the old culture. This thing about, "I'm only going to tell you once" isn't part of our culture.

### Horace Axtell

I don't remember ever telling any of my younger people that. Just a while ago I was just joking. (Laughter) I have 27 grandchildren and they ask me a lot of things. I don't say that. That wouldn't be the way I was taught. If somebody asks you a question and you answer it, and so many months later they come and ask you the same thing, it wouldn't be right for a person to say that. I never tried to say that, but I've heard people say that. Any time anybody has a question I try to address it the best I can. If there is something more I've thought of afterwards, and they come back again, then I can tell them more. I don't just drop the subject when somebody asks me a question. I still keep on thinking of what else I should have told her or him. So when they come back I have another answer.

### Ozzie Williamson

I don't think the majority of the older people I know would ever be offended if you came back and asked again. I always tell the younger people I work with, "The only dumb question I know of is one that's not asked." If you have a question, don't be afraid to ask it. I don't think an Elder would be offended if you came back. I've never heard any Elders use that term anyway. It's something new in this society. It was never heard of and used when we were growing up. In the field of alcoholism that I work in, there have been thousands upon thousands of people that I've tried to help. Some of them got sober and some didn't. Some came back and some are still coming back—but I'm not telling them to go away. I'm going to spend time with them and try to help them as long as they are asking and wanting help. If that Elder is really concerned about helping you, it doesn't matter how many times you ask. ✿



# Honoring Bill Iron Moccasin



Bill Iron Moccasin was a man of family, American Indian Culture, and Native sobriety. He was a veteran in World War II. His sobriety journey began on January 1, 1954, and his sobriety birthday was November 22, 1966. Bill connected with White Bison in September, 1999 at the First Annual Circles of Recovery Conference in Colorado Springs, Colorado; he contributed his Wellbriety story to the **Red Road to Wellbriety** (the Indian Big Book). Bill taught Lakota language at Sisseton-Wahpeton Tribal College in Sisseton, South Dakota and loved to spend time with his children, grandchildren, and the Headstart children in his community. White Bison honors Bill's memory, his wife Carol, and his family for all they gave the Wellbriety Movement. Please also see Bill's interview entitled *Lessons from the Old Culture* in Wellbriety! Online magazine, Volume 4, #2.

