

# Wild Indians:

Native Perspectives on the Hiawatha  
Asylum for Insane Indians



**N**ative peoples are the intergenerational survivors of a holocaust, the continuing and ongoing effects of which we struggle with every day. Not a single one of us, from the oldest elder to the newest newborn, escaped unscathed.

**BY PEMINA YELLOW BIRD**

These horrors cannot be erased. But this is where the magic begins: replace the voice that only whispers about your pain and loss with a strong and unwavering one, and be prepared to tell your story with courage and conviction, to add your voice to all the others, never to be silenced again.

## Acknowledgments: A Great Thanksgiving

I respectfully dedicate this work to those Native people who suffered, languished and died at the Hiawatha Insane Asylum for Indians, with the hope that their story is told in a way that brings them peace. We remember you, Pitiful Ones; we *will not* forget you.

I also wish to add to this dedication Mr. Harold Ironshield, to honor his ceaseless efforts to bring dignity to those who were cruelly denied in life, as well as the memory of my beloved aunt, Mrs. Maggie Hall



*The author, Pemina Yellow Bird (center), with other activists on the former grounds of the Canton Asylum for Insane Indians.*

White Calfe, whose courage, strength and perseverance in the face of tremendous loss and suffering echoed that of those who preceded her.

I thank Dr. Patricia Deegan of the National Empowerment Center, whose vision was broad enough, and whose compassionate spirit was more than generous

enough, to lovingly prepare a place for native Peoples to begin telling their stories. *We ti go staad*, Pat: you are a warrior spirit who first shattered the master narrative for all survivors of mental institutions, and you possess the heart and courage to replace it with the truth. What a gift you gave us, Pat, and I lift up my own heart, full of thanks and praise for you.

I also wish to thank Vanessa Jackson, our colleague who researched another living nightmare for African-Americans at Central State Hospital in Milledgeville, Georgia, for this project. Her courage, tenacity, and great heart inspired and influenced me and, best of all, held me up when the way grew dark. Her knowledgeable, eloquent and passionate discourse on issues surrounding survivors of mental institutions simultaneously informed and blew me away.

Also, a heartfelt thanks to another colleague, Larry Fricks, and the crew of ex-patient activists who worked tirelessly to restore the enormous cemetery at Milledgeville, which contains a mind-boggling 30,000 unmarked graves, long abandoned and grown up in brambles. Your work restored not only the cemetery, but also, in death, bestowed respect and peace on so many who knew not those states in life.

And to all survivors everywhere: thank you for believing in yourselves, thank you for your tremendous courage and refusal to give up, thank you for loving life, thank you for telling the story, thank you for bringing us all closer to the truth. Your suffering shall not have been in vain, for many are those who shall live and rejoice because of you. —PYB

## Prologue

I am an enrolled member of the Three Affiliated Tribes, the Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara Nations. In our own language we call ourselves the *Nueta* (Mandan), or the People of the First Man; the *Hidatsa*, or the Willow or River Crow; and the *Sahnish*, The Friendly People. Intermarried and interrelated now, we were once three separate and distinct Nations who were living in close proximity to one another when the federal government decided in the mid-1880s to corral the Native peoples in our region onto reservations. Because our numbers had been drastically reduced by European diseases, warfare and other genocidal practices of the federal government, our once numerous and powerful Nations were placed on one reservation along the wooded bottomlands of the Missouri River. Our nations shared the same close, village-living agrarian lifestyles and were premier tradespeople of our riverine territory, trading the produce from our large gardens with tribes from as far away as the Pacific Ocean, the Gulf of Mexico and many Nations east of *Atiba Waduxde*, Mysterious or Holy Grandfather, our name for our beloved Missouri River.

Our peoples, for centuries students and philosophers of the stars and of all nature, gentle, compassionate, hard-working and courageous, lived a completely Spirit-dominated life, with every decision made on behalf of the people completed in an attitude of love, prayer and humility. This was our life, these were the ways of our ancestors, and in a very short period of time our millennia-old way of life was nearly wiped out by the behaviors and actions of the newcomers to our country. These newcomers seemed to us greedy and barbaric, savages who did not respect life, who did not respect us or even regard us as human. Superior numbers and weapons, combined with an utter lack of conscience and an unquenchable greed, made them formidable killers of Native people, and we moved again and again at their command but also to put as much space between them and ourselves as possible. Consequently, our homelands, which once extended the entire length of the Missouri River, are today located in the upper Missouri River region in what is now known as North Dakota, and are contained within the Fort Berthold Reservation, named after a military fort built by the United States to oppress and exploit our Nations.

For these and many other reasons that

you will not see truthfully reflected in America's history books, Native peoples are the intergenerational survivors of a holocaust, the continuing and ongoing effects of which we struggle with every day. Not a single one of us, from the oldest elder to the newest newborn, escaped unscathed. Not then, not now.

I work for and represent my Nation on a number of different issues, such as the repatriation and reburial of our ancestors whose bodies and burial property have been stolen, curated and studied in countless museums and universities, as well as state and federal agencies and even private "collections." I also work on issues related to the preservation and protection of our people's sacred, cultural and historic sites, to keep them from disappearing under the onslaught of industrial and recreational development. When possible, I also add my voice to those who are trying to protect our Mother Earth, for we all need clean air, water, and soil to live, and we have fouled and disrespected our Mother almost beyond her ability to recover. Finally, I am a member of the Board of Directors for the Indigenous Peoples' Council on Biocolonialism, whose mission is to preserve and protect Native people's DNA resources from scientific exploitation and theft.

These important issues are just a few

and the pursuit of happiness as we saw it—self-evident, inalienable human rights guaranteed to others here in our own homelands.

Sounds grim, doesn't it? Well, it *is* grim, and it gets worse, as our examination of just one issue will soon reveal. Human beings, however, are gifted with remarkable strength, resiliency and the ability to recover from even the worst tragedies, and our people are no different. To do that we must be allowed to grieve the centuries of unrieved loss our people have endured. We must ask and answer what I call the Three Magic Questions and which I consider integral to Native people's recovery experience: we must ask ourselves (1) what happened to us? and, (2) these things that happened to us, how are they affecting us today? and finally, (3) we must look among our original teachings, values and instructions to re-discover what we must do to take good care of ourselves. No one can do this for us; the journey, the work, the achievements, are ours alone to do. Fortunately, we still have the tools we will need to accomplish this.

We must then *tell* our stories of loss, of violation, of what happened to us, and we must at long last grieve those things; we must determine how the past informs us, is

Dr. Patricia Deegan calls this mythologization of America's history "the master narrative," and she is absolutely correct in doing so. We have all been raised with a sanitized version of past events, particularly when those past events are ugly and don't quite gel with the image the United States has fabricated for us. The U.S. government has committed murder, has kidnapped, has coerced and controlled, has violated human rights, all in the name of God and a strange definition of democracy. These are the truths we need to speak to shatter the master narrative, and by supplanting the master narrative with our stories of truth, Native peoples will once again stand and walk, whole and complete, here in our own homelands. And that day will come for each of us if we speak with courage and conviction, and it will be a good day.

All of this recovery work must take place before we will again lift our hearts up from the ground; and in doing this painful but healing work, we must be heard. Again and again, for as long as it takes. This country must finally hear our stories of pain, loss, suffering and violation. Only then will the magic happen, only then will we come back to ourselves, only then will our people truly live once more, the way the Creator intended us to do.

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that Native Nations all across the country struggle with every day. We also fight to keep what is left of our homelands, cultures, languages, and intellectual, cultural and property rights. Our loved ones are dying in unprecedented numbers from heart disease, diabetes, cancer, substance abuse, and sheer heart-sickness. We have the highest rate of suicides of all ages, we have the highest rate of infant mortality, and we have the lowest life expectancy of any group in the United States. We are chronically short of housing, jobs, economic development, and on the really bad days, hope. Our leaders daily face the challenge of stemming the rising tide of despair our people feel, along with a rage we are steadily taking out on one another, all because a holocaust was perpetrated on our Nations to deprive us of life, liberty

part of who we are, and how it walks with us every day of our lives as Native people. We must tell those stories and we must determine for ourselves, based on our own original teachings and instructions, what we must do to care for ourselves. *We must speak the truth about the holocaust—so that we can stop blaming ourselves for something that the United States government is solely responsible for.* In conducting the first honest airing of the horrors of our holocaust, as told by individual stories, Native peoples will forever sunder the master narrative contained in America's history books that minimizes and whitewashes our horrific past to make it palatable for those who want to believe that America was "settled" by heroic pioneers of undaunted courage, and is therefore a good and democratic place to live.

**T**he story I am about to tell takes place amidst some of the darkest times of our holocaust, tangled in a horrific web of greed, political opportunism, and racist oppression. It is about the Hiawatha Insane Asylum for Indians of Canton, South Dakota, which was created in 1899 by the United States Congress, and whose short but brutal existence ended in 1933. It was created during a period of time when Congress had passed a federal law that prohibited our people from practicing our own spirituality. Our ceremonies became criminal activities, punishable by federal law. Some of those sanctions included withholding rations we had come to rely upon (starving the people into compliance, since whites had long since hunted our game nearly to extinction), withholding of other treaty payments (for which we'd already

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given up trillions of dollars of lands, minerals, and resources), and incarceration.

Other laws provided for the kidnapping of our children, who were shipped hundreds and thousands of miles away to military, Christian boarding schools, where they were spiritually, physically, sexually, and emotionally abused to “beat the Indian” out of them. Indeed, the motto of these schools was “Kill the Indian and save the man.” Those who survived the experience, and many did not, came home traumatized, or beaten into submission and assimilated into white ways, and many no longer felt happy among their own people. Many of these survivors, knowing nothing else, raised their families the same way they had been raised, thus introducing cycles of violence, abuse and abandonment among Nations for whom it was unthinkable to strike or harm a child in any way.

Still other laws allowed for the theft of our remaining homelands, and set up the reservation agents as demigods who, on a whim, could lock away individuals on minor or even trumped-up charges. Indeed, all they had to do was to declare someone a “troublemaker,” and that person could be sent away, never to be seen again. These agents’ decisions were final, and had the effect of tearing apart families, clans, bands and entire Nations. Native peoples had no access to lawyers or the courts, as we were not citizens of the United States. Many reservation agents abused this power without consequence and became rich diverting treaty monies into their own pockets. Stories about of agents who actually warehoused treaty payments in the form of food and goods, and opened trading posts, selling our property to homesteaders who were homesteading stolen Native lands.

Quite a racket, right? Let’s see: first we kill them, weaken them, make them stop being who they are by punishing them for praying and by taking their children away through forced assimilation, then we take their land through treaties where we promise to pay them a fraction of what their land is worth, then we steal the payment and sell it to other people who are settling the land

we stole, which expands our territory and increases our tax base! The United States makes out like a bandit. These and many other atrocities comprise the context in which the creation of the Canton Asylum took place.

The Hiawatha Insane Asylum for Indians is nothing for the citizens of the United States to be proud of; there’s no way to pretty it up or justify what took place there, hence its absence in the master narrative. The few accounts of the Asylum that do exist have been written by two non-Native historians and one psychiatrist, whose work I rely upon herein. While I am grateful to them for finding the topic worth writing about, it is also my belief that the time is long overdue for this story to be told from a Native perspective, because the story is only half-told without that perspective. It is also crucial, as part of the healing, for Native people *to tell our own stories, a thing we do well, given half the chance*. To that end, I am even more grateful for the heroic and extraordinary efforts of a Lakota journalist, Mr. Harold Ironshield, whose 13-year struggle to restore to dignity the resting places of the 121 Native people buried at the Hiawatha Insane Asylum for Indians and to bring its story to the light has made a way open for my own research. To his strong and untiring voice I humbly add my own.

The Hiawatha Insane Asylum for Indians began in 1899 as a pork-barrel project in the minds of two South Dakota congressmen who wanted to attract settlers, create jobs and generally build the economy of their newly minted state, which, not incidentally, was carved out of the aboriginal homelands of my people. After being told by a reservation agent that Indian “defectives” were expensive to house in state institutions, these men, urged by a fledgling, hometown Chamber of Commerce, went to Congress with a bill whose language stated that there was no one to care for these unfortunate savages and so it was up to the Great White Father to create a place where they could be helped and aided. The bill was signed into law that year with an appropriation of \$75,000 and the Hiawatha Insane Asylum

for Indians became the first and only federally funded mental institution for Native people in the United States.

The Asylum was located outside the town of Canton, South Dakota, the hometown of one of the congressmen. With the money in hand and the need for pretense at caring about Native peoples over, Canton’s Chamber of Commerce set about keeping the money in the community. They built the new asylum, buying materials and labor locally, and placed in charge the attorney who had drawn up the papers for the city’s sale of the asylum’s grounds to Congress. Attorney Oscar S. Gifford became the first superintendent in November 1901, while the asylum building was still under construction. A year later, he hired Dr. John F. Turner, a physician, as his assistant. An attorney and a physician—in other words, no one trained in the field of psychiatry—constituted the extent of the professional staff expected to deal with the supposedly “insane” Native patients for the next seven years of the asylum’s existence.

I use the phrase “supposedly insane” to describe the Native inmates for two reasons. First, and most importantly, Native peoples generally do not have a notion of “insane” or “mentally ill” in our cultures. Indeed, I have been unable to locate a Native Nation whose indigenous language has a word for that condition. The closest we can come is a word that is more closely aligned with “crazy,” and that means that the person is either a very funny person, someone who makes you laugh all the time, or is someone who cannot be reasoned with because he or she is too angry and cannot think. Second, since the Native inmates came from tribes all across the country, at a time when few Native people were fluent in English, I cannot see how a diagnosis of any kind could be made, as I doubt very much that the staff could speak Navajo, Menominee, Ojibway or Lakota, which are only a few of the thirty to fifty Nations represented at the Asylum at any given time.

Add to that the power of the reservation agent, who could simply declare one insane and have one shipped off, and we have a



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very grim situation indeed. But the inability to communicate with the Native inmates and their lack of even being familiar with the concept of mental illness notwithstanding, inmates remained undiagnosed because there was no need for a diagnosis. After all, hundreds and thousands of miles from their homes and families, who was there to care about the fate of Canton’s inmates. Who was there to stand up for them? They had become the luckless pawns of a racist federal government and greedy small-town homesteaders, neither of which regarded the Pitiful Ones as human beings with human or civil rights.

The power of the Bureau of Indian Affairs agents to commit our Nations’ youth and other tribal members to Canton Asylum absent any legitimate medical reason was increased many times over by the Asylum’s eagerness to declare them “defective” or “insane.” It was a symbiotic relationship of the most evil variety: as long as the Bureau had the power to declare tribal members insane, they maintained an illegal, inhumane and unparalleled level of control over the sovereign Nations, and as long as the Canton Asylum was supplied with “patients,” the money rolled in and the local business folk were happy and ensured the Bureau a place to send their troublemakers, and cemented their omnipotent power over our Nations.

Many of the inmates at Canton were there for reasons that had nothing to do with mental illness. Some were there because of a physical ailment, such as tuberculosis, epilepsy, senility, or congenital or injury-related deformities. Most, however, were young—thirty years and younger—with many children present at any given time. These unfortunate individuals found themselves incarcerated at Canton for arguing with a reservation agent, a schoolteacher or a spouse. Many were there because they refused to give up their ceremonial and spiritual ways of life. Still others were there because they refused to allow their children to be kidnapped and carted away to government boarding schools, or for refusing to be stripped of some other



*It’s unlikely that any “patients” used the swingset pictured on this postcard. An investigation of the Canton Asylum in 1933 found children strait-jacketed and chained. A young epileptic girl was shackled at the ankle to a steam radiator*

basic human right. Obviously, nobody went to Canton to get well. Incarceration at Canton meant no medical care of any kind and what’s more, incarceration there was terminal: institutional policy declared these Native people to be “defectives,” and as such, procreation must be prohibited and they must be sterilized before they could be discharged. Since the superintendent did not know how to conduct sexual sterilization procedures, inmates simply remained until they died. Of the average ten discharges per year at Canton, nine were due to death.

In 1908 Dr. Harry Hummer, a psychiatrist trained at the other federally run insane asylum, St. Elizabeth’s Hospital in Washington, DC, was hired as Superintendent of the Hiawatha Asylum. His training however did not prevent him from running the Asylum more like a prison than as a place where Native people received medical treatment. He was still at the helm in 1933 when the Asylum closed. An investigator found him to be rude and even obscene in verbal discourse with his staff and the inmates and regarded his behavior as a direct reason for the high turnover in staff. Hummer was uncooperative during government investigations of

the Asylum, and was especially vague when asked for records determining diagnosis and treatment of the Asylum’s incarcerated Native people.

Hummer allowed no traditional Native forms of social activity: even Native dances and music were forbidden. It must be noted that for most Native peoples these two forms of human expression often have sacred meaning for us. The inmates at Canton were, by these means, denied their right to pray, which is an integral part of our living cultures and the only means to recovering from any sickness. Meals were largely meatless and full of starches, consisting of vegetables the inmates had grown themselves, and were heavily augmented with sweets and breads. No traditional Native foods were used, thus introducing dietary health dysfunctions among people who were used to eating healthy diets full of lean meats, vegetables, no processed sugars and only natural fruits and berries for sweets.

Escapes were frequently attempted but rarely successful. Patients always wanted only one thing—to go home. But since everyone’s homes were hundreds or even thousands of miles away the journey, on foot and without resources, was long and

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difficult. Also, since everyone only wanted to get home, it was an easy thing to determine which way an escapee would travel, and capture just became a matter of time. Nor were patients allowed visits by relatives or friends, although repeated attempts by families were made not only to visit but to obtain the release of their incarcerated relatives. Even if long distances had not been a factor for poverty-stricken Native families, Hummer felt that family visits delayed the recovery of his patients and he refused to allow them. More likely, Hummer was afraid that family visits would mean early discharges for his inmates, and no inmates meant no income.

In the most complete isolation, then, Native inmates could not speak their languages, sing their songs, dance their dances, eat their food, see their relatives, or ever hope to see or hear or experience these loving and familiar things again.

**M**uch of the information we have today about the conditions at Canton Asylum comes from a series of investigations that began in 1929 with Dr. Samuel Silk. Dr. Silk was dispatched twice to Canton by the Secretary of the Interior to investigate multiple staff complaints of neglect and cruel treatment of patients, administrative mismanagement, even sexual harassment charges filed by female workers against Dr. Hummer. Dr. Silk's reports told a horrific tale of the abuse, neglect, trauma, medical maltreatment, torture and death of the helpless inmates at Canton.

"Canton's inmates were overwhelmingly long-term residents.... When Dr. Silk traveled to Canton Asylum at the time of its closing in 1933, he found one inmate who had been confined for twenty-four years. Such long-term confinement was possible and all the more reprehensible because of the relative youth of Canton's inmate population. In

1924, a little more than half the inmates were under thirty years of age, with the vast majority in their twenties. Fifteen inmates were aged twenty or less, including four who were under six years old. Only nine inmates were sixty or older. Asylums housing non-Indians tended to become dumping grounds for the aged senile in the early 20th century. The Canton institution clearly did not fit that pattern, suggesting something unique about the Asylum for Insane Indians. An explanation for the youth of its inmate population is the Asylum's use as a penal institution."<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, Dr. Silk, in a subsequent investigation of the asylum in 1933, noted that only "twenty-five to thirty of the ninety inmates at Canton actually belonged in a mental hospital." Some twenty to twenty-five were mentally deficient, but without psychoses; they could be cared for in an institution for the feeble-minded. Another fifteen to twenty were "epileptic, defective, and mildly psychotic (mostly senile); these individuals were quiet, well behaved, and could live on a reservation or with relatives under very nominal supervision. Rounding out the asylum's population were another twenty or so inmates in no way defective or impaired who could make adjustment to any community, let alone on a reservation. Canton Asylum," Dr. Silk noted, "housed a large population of young people sent to that institution because of some difficulty at a school or reservation agency—a fight with a white man, or a fight with a husband or wife."<sup>2</sup>

In his investigations, Dr. Silk found children, strait-jacketed and chained to beds, lying quietly in their own excrement; he found a young epileptic girl chained at the ankle to a hot-steam radiator with shackles borrowed from the local sheriff, and said it was a "miracle" she had not been severely burned; he found calm, well behaved and mentally healthy patients who had been locked in their rooms for periods of up to

three years; he found every single window locked and barred—not even in the wards, where each bed had an open and full chamber pot beneath it, was fresh air allowed; he discovered institutional policies that allowed attendants, hired from local farm families, to make decisions on the application and use of physical restraints of the patients—such decisions were not open to revision or review by professional staff. Consequently, the vast majority of the patients, who posed no problems for their jailers, spent the balance of their time at Canton chained or restrained or locked up for the convenience of the very people who were hired to care for them.

Silk also found that a high number of patients suffered from such treatable diseases as tuberculosis, gallstones, epileptic seizures, syphilis, and flu, but had not even been tested, let alone treated, and were simply allowed to die slow and agonizing deaths. In two of the rare documented cases of death, one patient died because Hummer refused to allow the staff physician to treat the patient with simple gallstone surgery, and another died because he choked on his own tubercular sputum during a seizure, which he suffered while chained to his bed, alone, in his locked room.

Dr. Silk's final report declared the Hiawatha Insane Asylum for Indians to be "intolerable," and a place of "padlocks and chamberpots." He was sickened by what he saw, heard, and smelled, and he recommended that the Asylum be closed, healthy patients sent home, and those who required care and assistance (sixty or so of the 1933 population) be sent to St. Elizabeth's Hospital in Washington, DC. This was accomplished, despite Canton's Chamber of Commerce's efforts to use the families of patients to plead that the Asylum be kept open. A prominent, local banker took up the fight, no doubt because he was profiting from the Asylum, and had a circuit judge

<sup>1</sup> "Power and Powerlessness: The People of the Canton Asylum for Insane Indians," Scott Riney, *South Dakota History*: 14, Spring, 1984.

<sup>2</sup> Report, "Asylum for Insane Indians, Canton, SD, September, 1933," Dr. Samuel A. Silk, Clinical Director, St. Elizabeth's Hospital, Washington, DC.

<sup>3</sup> Letters, Dr. Samuel Silk to Dr. White, St. Elizabeth's Hospital, September–October, 1933.

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place a restraining order on the Indian Affairs Commission to prevent the closure. Although this order delayed closure, it did not prevent it, and approximately sixty patients were transported to Washington by special train.<sup>3</sup> St. Elizabeth's Hospital, which is still operating, refused access to those patients' records, so their ultimate fate is unknown, although one feels safe in concluding it was not a happy one, so far from home and loved ones.

Unfortunately, the sad story of the Hiawatha Insane Asylum for Indians does not end there. Shortly after the Asylum's closure, the federal government "gave" the land containing the Asylum's grounds to the city of Canton, which promptly razed the Asylum and its outbuildings, with the exception of its small hospital. The Hiawatha Golf Course was later established on the former grounds, incorporating even the cemetery that contained the final resting places of 121 inmates who died during their incarceration and had the ill fortune to die too far from home for their families to effect their return. This was done despite repeated and sustained

protests from tribal governments who did not want the Pitiful Ones' resting places desecrated after they had already suffered so much.

Lakota journalist Harold Ironshield, however, took up this cause thirteen years ago, and has been a tireless and active worker in the restoration of peace and dignity to those lonely graves in Canton. Through his efforts, the cemetery with its unmarked graves has been fenced out of the golf course, and presumably golfers obey the signs on the fence, which direct them not to play from within the cemetery. We are told, however, that they still do, so long as no one is standing there watching them.

Another one of Mr. Ironshield's achievements is the annual memorial services he holds for those who are buried there. He brings people of all backgrounds together, traditional prayers and sacred songs are rendered, our good traditional food is prepared and offered to the Pitiful Ones, all according to our custom. He makes sure these ancestors know they are not forgotten, that their memories are cherished and held up, that what happened to them will no longer be hidden from view. He carries

on our traditions of remembering and honoring those who have gone before us, and especially, sending a voice for justice. Because of him, these Pitiful Ones did not suffer in vain, and their story *will* be told.

Dr. Patricia Deegan and I attended Harold's memorial service on a chilly, windy spring day in May. As we approached the city of Canton by car, I turned on my internal camcorder and began to record my impressions of what it must have been like for all those native peoples who were imprisoned there.

Typical of many northern plains homesteading towns, Canton was and is supported by rural agriculture. It was settled largely by Scandinavian Lutheran immigrants. It is surrounded by flat prairies punctuated by low, rolling hills. The wind blows all the time on the prairie, and the summers are hot and the winters are killingly cold.

*I'm riding in the car, imagining that I am a Navajo from the desert...* and I'm chained to my keeper on the long train ride, or chained somewhere in the back of a buckboard wagon, and I'm jolted and banged around and it's winter and I'm sure I'm going to freeze to death. I don't know why I'm there, only that I refused to allow my children to be taken to the white man's school, where they would surely die or, at the very least, be turned away from The People. When I refused and argued with the government agent, that cruel white man with the hairy face and the smelly body grabbed me and shackled me in front of my parents and my wife and my children, and dragged me out of my circular home and out of the protective presence of my people's Four Sacred Mountains, and I have been in his hateful presence ever since, jerked and yanked and beaten. Now I'm freezing to death, I recognize nothing in this harsh and unforgiving landscape, I do not know where I have been taken, and I have not eaten for I don't know how many days, because there are black periods of missing time, which occur when the white



*The Asylum for Insane Indians was torn down and, in its place, the Hiawatha Municipal Golf course was built by the town of Canton, S.D. A cemetery with 121 native men, women, children and newborns who died at the Asylum is located near the fifth tee. The cemetery is out of bounds—as long as nobody's watching.*



**The one eye-witness record we have, that of a former worker at Canton, tells us that at night the building echoed with the wailing of the inmates. I know they were not merely wailing: they were singing their death songs, they were mourning and grieving, they were calling out to the relatives, and to the Spirits, and to the Creator, seeking succor.**

man strikes me with his pistol. When we finally arrive at a large white man building set on a hill, again I am dragged and jerked around, pulled into the building, where my clothes are torn from me and my head is shaved! My head is shaved! Part of my spirit lies there on the floor, and I only want the rest of me to die, too, to end this horrible nightmare with smelly and hateful white people screaming at me in their ugly harsh language full of words of violence and hate. Then, still shackled, I am given white man's clothing, dragged to the belly of that foul and disgusting-smelling brick box of a building, and chained to a bed, which hides a round metal container of human filth. I look around me and see other Native people, and I immediately try to ask them where I am and what has happened to me, but they look at me curiously and answer me in a language that is not the white man's, but still not my own. At this, I finally start my death song, and I wail and wail the high, keening sounds of those who long for death's release.

*Or maybe I'm a Menominee from the wooded Great Lakes area...* and when I close

my eyes I can see my mother's home made of the protective and pure bark of the birch tree, and I can taste my people's staple food, from which our name is derived, *menomin*, wild rice. I'm fifteen years old and I'm here because the schoolmaster raped me for the last time and I hit him over the head with his own chair and I was seized and chained and beaten and shipped here by train and then wooden wagon. I'm scared and I'm sore and the sacred time did not come for me this month, which means that the hated white man's seed started a baby inside me and I am shamed and violated to my core and I'm deeply, deeply sickened. I want to die, I just want to die, and I wail and weep and slash at myself.

*Or maybe I'm a Lakota seer*, an old man whose great gift of healing The People has caused the white man to fear me so much that I was taken from my circular buffalo-hide home in the middle of the night, roped to a horse, and ridden here for many long hours and days. I do not protest, for the Spirits are with me, and they comfort me, and they tell me that I will not be here

long, that I will soon be with them, and that I am to help as many of the Pitiful Ones as possible before it is my time to leave. When I arrive, I see many people of many Nations, caressing their bald heads, limping from their many wounds and injuries, crying out in many languages to their Creator, their Spirits, to help them. Many are sick from the foul air and bad food; many have already given up and sit quietly in their own offal, chained to their beds or the bars on the windows, only staring and breathing and waiting for the hateful whites to bring the necessary items to clean themselves up.

All of these images ran through my mind as we drove through Canton. My heart was breaking, thinking of how they must have suffered, how foreign and cruel everything and everyone must have seemed to them. How frightening and despairing. On the other side of town, however, we finally reached the Hiawatha Golf Course, the final grounds of the house of horror where my imaginary Native inmates actually lived. Pat pulled the car over so that we could read a sign about a historical point of interest. Thinking it was about the Asylum, I left the car and began to read, only to learn that the sign was erected to commemorate a wooden ski jump built by the Scandinavian homesteaders, probably so they could continue the sport of the Fatherland, Alpine skiing, only without the mountains. Pat and I both pictured the inmates at Canton, standing at the locked and barred windows, watching as Canton's citizens frolicked in the winter snow. Later, we compared our impressions, and Pat thought it must have been awful for them to have been locked away and watching others play and have fun, but I had a different reaction: I thought those poor Native prisoners must have shaken their heads in disbelief, thinking that white people were foolish and were always trying to discover new ways to die!

The one eye-witness record we have, that of a former worker at Canton, tells us that at night the building echoed with the wailing



*Driving past the Hiawatha Golf Course, we spotted this historical marker and stopped to read it, expecting to find some meaningful remembrance of the Canton Asylum inmates. Instead we learned that on this site, homesick Scandinavian homesteaders had built a ski jump.*



Some of the inmates at Canton came from tribes that had very strong taboos about residing anywhere near burials, because their teachings told of a consequential ghost-sickness, yet these same people were confined to a building with views overlooking the cemetery. For them, it must have been death without the release of death; for all of them, it must have been a living nightmare.



*Nobody went to Canton to get well. Incarceration at Canton meant no medical care of any kind and what's more, incarceration there was terminal: institutional policy declared these Native people to be "defectives," and as such, procreation must be prohibited and they must be sterilized before they could be discharged. Since the superintendent did not know how to conduct sexual sterilization procedures, inmates simply remained until they died. Of the average ten discharges per year at Canton, nine were due to death. Some 131 inmates who died during their incarceration had the ill fortune to die too far from home for their families to effect their return.*

of the inmates. I know they were not merely wailing: they were singing their death songs, they were mourning and grieving, they were calling out to the relatives, and to the Spirits, and to the Creator, seeking succor.

They were mourning the deaths of their spirits while their bodies were still alive and moving. Common practice was to cut the hair of all inmates, but in many Native belief systems, our hair is alive, and has a spirit and power of its own. We do not like others to even touch our hair, let alone shave it off. To us, that is a form of spiritual murder, and we cut our hair only when we are in deep mourning. They knew their spirits were gone because their hair was gone, and they were giving voice to an unspeakable loss.

They must also have wailed for the death of their personal freedom and liberty, for in our cultures it was a foreign thing to lock up another human being and deprive him of the freedom of personal movement. Such behavior was unheard of among our peoples—no person has the right to force another person to do anything. They must

have been frightened, deeply traumatized, at finding themselves locked up in such a cold, hateful and foreign place, so far from home and family.

They must have longed for a familiar face, their own food, their own homes, their own tongues. They must have replayed, over and over in their minds, every song, every ceremony, every sad and happy event from their lifetimes, trying to hang onto what they loved—their culture that told them who they were, who they belonged to.

Knowing they would never go home, these Pitiful Ones must have looked upon the Asylum's cemetery with fear and dread. They had no reason to expect that they would be cared for and sent on their final journey according to

Their people's belief and custom—they must have known, then, that their spirits would wander endlessly without the ceremonies required to ensure safe passage to the Spirit World. Some of the inmates at Canton came from tribes that had very strong taboos about residing anywhere

near burials, because their teachings told of a consequential ghost-sickness, yet these same people were confined to a building with views overlooking the cemetery. For them, it must have been death without the release of death; for all of them, it must have been a living nightmare.

I wept for them that day. We all did. We wept and we prayed for their peace and I, for one, also prayed for the strength and guidance I would need to tell the story of these Pitiful Ones, tell it again and again, so that our people could empower and heal ourselves through the telling and that we would use the memory of these Pitiful Ones as a rallying point to work to ensure that never again, never again, will one of our people suffer at the hands of an omnipotent, destructive and corrupt government, or from the criminally misguided acts of the mental health industry in this country.

**Gee dee nux a dowl**  
"These are my relatives"

**Then, if you also see how we are solely responsible for telling these stories, replace the voice that only whispers about your pain and loss with a strong and unwavering one, and be prepared to tell your story with courage and conviction, to add your voice to all the others, never to be silenced again.**

## Epilogue

If you have finished reading this story, and if it pained you or made you cry, I apologize to all those whose were brought to tears because the story triggered their own suffering, loss, oppression or even compassion. I urge you, however, with love and respect, to summon the courage you know you have to read a little more, because here is where the magic starts.

Do you see how empowering it is to tell about what someone did to us? To shine a light on a dark story, hidden away in shame, stashed away in America's history-closet? To recognize that we are not to blame for our own oppression and abuse? Do you see, as Native peoples, how our past walks with us every day? The depths by which we are affected by what happened to us a hundred, two hundred, five hundred years ago? Do you see how our inheritance has been one of ungrieved loss and shame? Then, if you also see how we are solely responsible for telling these stories, replace the voice that only whispers about your pain and loss with a strong and unwavering one, and be prepared to tell your story with courage and conviction, to add your voice to all the others, never to be silenced again.

Prepare, then, for the long and magical journey that will reveal to you all the tools you will need to take care of yourself, and prepare to dedicate yourself to that endeavor. The generations to come are depending on you: your children and grandchildren are looking at you to make a way open for them, and the generations past are also depending on you to speak for those who no longer have a voice, and these things *you can do, I know* you can, because many already have. If others can do it, if others can save themselves from despair and turn their lives around to help themselves and their people, so can you. All it takes is love for yourself, love for your family and for your people. Though the way will be long and sometimes painful and

frightening, remember you come from Nations of survivors, from a long and respected line of leaders who loved and fought and died for their people.

If you have a story of loss and pain to tell, contact your tribal social services department—tell them you want an appointment with a safe, caring counselor with experiences in issues related to one's family of origin. Tell them you have three questions you need help asking and answering for yourself, and tell them *it's your story to tell, and not anybody else's*. Tell them you want and need to tell it for yourself, in your own way, and that you only need someone safe and confidential to tell it to, not someone who is going to manipulate your recovery to suit a medical therapy model that doesn't work for Native people, such as a clinical, purely psychological method born of European cultures and values. Carefully consider any suggestions that you go on antidepressant or anti-anxiety medications, for there are harmful side effects in these medications.

Ask questions, find out what your tribal community has to offer, join self-help groups who offer an opportunity to tell your story. Then start talking to you relatives, to your friends, and try to locate a healthy elder to whom you can look for spiritual guidance and healing, for it is in our original teachings that you will find many answers. If you do not live in your tribal community, look in the community where you live to see what services are offered and try to benefit from the best of them. Be patient, take things a day at a time; you will need to do this to tell the difference between therapy, elders, and services that are good for you and those that may not be.

Above all, talk to your Creator, ask for a good guidance and a good understanding, ask for healing, be sincere when you ask and it will be given to you, a way will be made open to you. It may not be what you anticipate or expect, but trust in the process; it takes time and sometimes you have to

keep trying until you find the right therapist for you, or until you find an elder, spiritual leader or teacher who is able to help you. Learn also to listen, to hear what the Creator has to say to you. Watch how events unfold in your life; there are many things to learn therein. Most of all, trust in yourself—you are a perfect being, made by the Creator with love and light, and you have a unique purpose and duty to complete during your time on this Earth. Isn't it time you got started on that road?

Summon your considerable courage. You are a child of a long line of strong, courageous and beautiful people whose ties to all that is holy have never been severed. You already have whatever you need to pick up your heart, to look up and see, *really see*, with wonder and awe, the beauty all around you. Work to put yourself back in balance. All you have to do is believe in yourself, and to do that all you have to do is remember that the Creator made you, and you are therefore holy and sacred. Believe that. It's true. You are a being of love, of perfect love, and it is that love that will save you, that will restore life to you and your people. All you need is the courage to try, the courage to ask and answer those three magic questions. There are many, many people praying for you, and sending you strength, you just don't know it yet, but you will. Know yourself. Be true to yourself. Tell your story and let yourself grieve what you have lost. In this way you will regain what was lost for only a little while, and you will live.

I promise.

**We duT dunst shtud**  
*That's the way it always was*  
*That's the way it is now*  
*That's the way it will always be*