

## Birds Hill Park, the Dakota Eagle Sundance, and the Sweatlodge: Establishing a Sacred Site in a Provincial Park

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### ABSTRACT

*Little scholarly analysis has been made of the processes involved in returning Indigenous sacred locales to contemporary religious usage. In this paper, a historical and descriptive sketch is provided of the institutional and personal systems in place in the recovery of a Dakota sundance site in Birds Hill Provincial Park. After several meetings with various officials from the Manitoba Department of Conservation the White Buffalo Spiritual Society was given permission to hold a sundance ceremony at Birds Hill Provincial Park, located approximately twenty kilometers north of the City of Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. From 2000 until 2007 an annual sundance and regular sweatlodge ceremonies were held at a site in the Park selected by members of the White Buffalo Spiritual Society in consultation with Conservation officials. This article outlines significant events in the process of establishing and maintaining a sacred space in a Provincial Park, introduces the reader to the Dakota Eagle sundance, and notes the reasons why the sundance and sweatlodge ceremonies are viewed as important for the individual and community well-being.*

**Keywords:** Sundance, healing, spirituality, sweatlodge, Aboriginal.

### The Ceremonial Memory

The sundance and other ceremonies were, at one time, outlawed in the United States and Canada (Pettitpas 1994). In Canada, the Department of Indian Affairs created a series of amendments to the Indian

Act, beginning in 1885, in an attempt to exterminate all First Nations religious ceremonies and customs. These amendments were followed by forced attendance at residential schools in an attempt to assimilate First Nations people by erasing their languages and cultural ways. Superintendent of Indian Affairs, Duncan Campbell Scott was so determined to assimilate First Nations people, his “final solution to the Indian problem,” that he refused to alter the governments residential school policy despite the fact that his administration provided evidence that a high number of children are expected to die in the schools (Annett, 6). In Canada the amendments banning religious practices were removed from the Indian Act in 1951. Throughout the period of religious persecution, according to oral tradition, the sundance and other ceremonies were carried on in secret away from the prying eyes of the Indian agent and those community members who readily reported the activities of traditionalists. According to oral tradition, community members who reported the activities of traditionalists did so because they had either been Christianized and thus viewed the traditional ceremonies as evil, were seeking some favour from the Indian agent, or wanted to exact revenge on a community member. Arthur Amiotte writes about the clandestine persistence of ceremonies among the Lakota in the United States, “From oral tradition we have evidence of people on numerous Sioux reservations having sneaked off to the badlands or to hidden places in the hills where these formal ceremonies took place in as close to their original form as they could be” (Amiotte 1987, 75). Clyde Holler devotes a chapter of his book *Black Elk's Religion* to examining “The Sun Dance Under the Ban 1883–1934/1952;” the two ending dates reflecting when the sundance ban was lifted and when piercing was permitted, respectively (Holler 1995). Although Holler focuses on the ban in the United States, he does quote Wilson Wallis's work on the Canadian Dakota to highlight the “psychological effects of the ban on individual persons” (134). Wallis provides numerous accounts of individuals who were instructed in a dream by the Thunders, Buffalo, or some other waka being, to hold a certain dance in their honour. If the individual neglected to do so, serious negative repercussions resulted. An individual who neglected their dreams might be: struck

by lightning (Wallis 1947, 52); made sick or be killed (58); be gored by a buffalo (60); or, have some other misfortune befall them. If the individual fulfilled their dream instructions, then blessings followed; more often than not the individual would become a traditional healer and be able to heal others, find the buffalo, or perform other shamanic functions.

The damage that was done by the banning of the sundance and other ceremonies, along with forced assimilation through the residential schools and other assimilationist policies, was enormous and is still being felt today. Now, however, many non-Aboriginal people, non-governmental organizations (including Christian Churches), and the Canadian government have acknowledged the tragic errors of the past and are working in partnership with Aboriginal people and organizations to undo the damage. Moreover, Aboriginal people are recovering from the damage and reviving what was taken from them. The ceremonies and cultural ways that are so important for inculcating social values and morals are being revitalized. It is through ceremonies such as the sundance and the sweatlodge that the healers and spiritual leaders are attempting to restore dignity, self-worth and cultural values among the people and to eliminate alcoholism, family violence, and other social ills. One such spiritual leader, Solomon Hall, *Wambdi Wičašta*<sup>1</sup> (Eagle Man), was instrumental in reviving the sundance in Sioux Valley, Manitoba. On September 20, 2008, Solomon Hall, passed away suddenly at his home in Sioux Valley. According to the obituary provided by his family, "In the mid 1970s he was given a dream from the Creator that he was to revive the Sacred Sundance that had been laid to rest in Sioux Valley in 1937...He was very instrumental in passing on his knowledge and teaching to many young men who became the Red Blanket Men" (<http://www.brockiedonovan.com>). Here we learn that the sundance in Sioux Valley had carried on, despite the ban, and that it was "laid to rest" in 1937. We are also introduced to the Red Blanket Men, otherwise known as the Red Blanket Society. The men who officiate at the Dakota Eagle Sundance, they type of sundance revived by Solomon Hall, are members of the Red Blanket Society. The Red Blanket Men have sacri-

ficed for many years at the sundance. The sundance is the place where, according to the oral teachings, one of the greatest forms of giving takes place—self-sacrifice, giving of oneself so that others may live. Exemplifying such cultural values as sharing, caring, love, generosity, bravery, commitment and sincerity, the dancers give up food and water for four days. The men fulfill pledges that they have made to have their chests pierced; two cuts are made in the chest with a scalpel and pegs made from the chokecherry tree are inserted through the incisions, a rope that is tied to the centre pole is attached to the pegs and the dancer pulls back from the pole until the pegs rip through the flesh. In a similar way, buffalo skulls may be attached to the back of a male dancer which he drags around the dance area until they rip through the flesh. Although women may pierce at some sundances, they don't pierce at the Eagle Sundance. The reason given is that women make the ultimate sacrifice by giving birth. Although the women do not pierce their chest or pull buffalo skulls they do give up food and water and may, as a result of a dream instruction, have an eagle feather sewn into their arm which is then pulled away, tearing their flesh. Both men and women may also choose to make flesh offerings whereby tiny pieces of flesh are cut away from their arms. Self-sacrifice at the sundance is the ultimate expression of *Mitákowás*. The phrase *mitákuye owás'i* (abbreviated locally in Manitoba as *mitákowás*) is the most profound expression of Dakota religiousness. The meaning of this expression points directly to what it means to be religious, to be human. It reflects a fundamental cosmological orientation that forms the basis of how human beings, ideally, should think, act, and inter-act with the cosmos, with all of creation. According to Dakota thought, internalizing and living ones life according to the principles and cultural values inherent in the *mitákuyowás* perspective is a means to living *wiçozani wašte*, “the good life.” All aspects of Dakota religious life reflect the *mitákuyowás* perspective; ceremonies are directed towards actualizing the principles inherent in a relational orientation. The basic social unit in Dakota society, the *tiyošpaye* (extended family unit), is grounded in this orientation and economic relations are guided by it. This cosmological orientation is expressed in the Dakota religious tradition, the Dakota

*wičoni* (way of life). Amiotte describes *wičoni* as "...practicing the cultural ideals as a matter of habit or automatic response with full commitment with the knowledge that by doing so one is moving, doing, and being in both a human and sacred manner as prescribed by Lakota tradition" (Amiotte 1985)." Basic cultural ideals or cultural values such as respect, sharing, caring, love, generosity, bravery, commitment, fortitude, humility, sincerity, and wisdom, are re-enforced or cultivated at the sundance. The "four cardinal Lakota virtues" are typically identified as "*woohitika* "courage" (west), *wawacintanka* "fortitude" (north), *wacantognaka* "generosity" (east), and *woksape* "wisdom" (south)" (Rice 1989, 61). The people are taught to take these values and live them in their daily life. Away from the sundance, in their daily life, the Red Blanket Men have exemplified *Mitákuyowás* cultural values. They have taken care of the elderly and responded to the requests and needs of the community, especially those of their sundance brothers and sisters. In recognition of their exemplary living and commitment to the values and principles inherent in the sundance and their knowledge of the proper protocols for running the ceremonies, they are initiated into the Red Blanket society. One of these Red Blanket Men, Calvin Pompana, had a vision of holding the Eagle Sundance at Birds Hill Provincial Park. He proceeded to do so, along with the support of his family and sweatlodge brothers and sisters, as well as the support of the other Red Blanket Men including his brother Alden Pompana and Solomon Hall's grandson Mark Hall, who has been given the sacred duty as *Wiwayang Waçipi Itqç* (Sundance Chief) and caretaker of the Eagle Sundance. An Eagle Sundance can not take place without the approval and support of the man given the responsibility of caring for the sundance (Solomon Hall's grandson Mark), the support of the other Red Blanket Men, the support of ones extended family, and, of course, a legitimate dream instruction.

The impetus to hold a sundance ceremony at Birds Hill Provincial Park began with Calvin Pompana's vision to have a ceremony close to the city of Winnipeg. Mr. Pompana has three spiritual names, *Wakiya Hokšida* (Thunder Boy); *Nawaqça Hokšida* (Ocean Boy); and, a name given to him by the Ojibwe, *Gitche Gineu* (Big Eagle). Although a

member of the Sioux Valley Dakota Nation in southwestern Manitoba, Mr. Pompana has lived in Winnipeg for many years. He has worked as Elder at the Headingly Correctional Institute and has been involved in many other initiatives requiring the services of an Elder and spiritual leader. Mr. Pompana founded the White Buffalo Spiritual Society as an organization from which to run the Birds Hill sundance and other educational and healing initiatives. It is a non-profit Aboriginal organization with charitable status. Members and associates are men and women Elders and traditional people from the Dakota, Ojibway, Cree, Métis, and other Aboriginal Nations from across Canada and the United States. Members also include non-Aboriginal people who have adopted Aboriginal ways and have participated in the ceremonies; including the annual sundance ceremony at Birds Hill Park and regular sweatlodge and other ceremonies sponsored by White Buffalo. Inspired by the teachings of White Buffalo Calf Spirit Women (described below), the organization is dedicated to healing and strengthening the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects of Aboriginal people and others belonging to the four symbolic colours of humans; White, Yellow, Black, and Red. The organization accomplishes its objectives through the traditional teachings and ceremonies and through education and training initiatives incorporating a holistic approach. The annual Birds Hill Park sundance was the initial focal point around which all of White Buffalo's activities revolved.

Sundances are held on reserves across Manitoba but there are many Aboriginal people who call Winnipeg home. In order to realize Calvin Pompana's vision, members of White Buffalo contacted by phone, letter, and in person various representatives from Parks and Natural Areas, beginning in December 1998. Initial contact began with a phone call by the President of White Buffalo to Director, Central Region, Worth Hayden in December 1998 and again on January 8, 1999. This was followed by an initial meeting between White Buffalo representatives and Parks Manager, Central Region, Tony Merkl on February 3, 1999 and again on March 12, 1999, along with a subsequent visit to Birds Hill Provincial Park to select a suitable site (June 30, 1999). The site where Pope John Paul II held mass, in September 1984, and the

Folk Festival site, was offered as possible locations for the ceremony but both were rejected. The Folk Festival was rejected for the obvious reason that it was a party site where drugs and alcohol was consumed and was deemed an inappropriate place to have such a sacred ceremony as the sundance; a ceremony held for the healing of the people from various sicknesses, including drug and alcohol abuse. Both sites were also not secluded enough to offer the requisite privacy. Another site was suggested by Mr. Merkl; a secluded area of natural prairie. All the members of White Buffalo that were present felt that this spot was the place where the sundance was to be held. One of the members related a dream (*wihambda*) that he had. In that dream he and Calvin were standing along the poplar trees looking at the sundance. The site where they were now standing was identical to the place in the dream. The group smoked the pipe on the newly selected grounds; blessing the site, establishing a connection to the place, and beginning the process of increasing sanctification.

Once the site was selected, White Buffalo Spiritual Society representatives met, on September 8, 1999, with Marilyn Peckett (in charge of protected areas) to outline their planned use of the specified area and to continue to develop a working relationship between the White Buffalo Spiritual Society and the Department of Natural Resources. White Buffalo received official approval from the Director of Parks and Natural Areas, C. Gordon Prouse in a letter dated October 19, 1999.

Shortly after receiving official approval, White Buffalo began to hold full moon ceremonies, otherwise known as pledge meetings. At these meetings, held every full moon until the sundance, traditional teachings are given, sacred songs are song with the big drum used at the sundance, and people hold the sacred chanunpa (pipe) and make their pledge. When a person picks up the pipe he or she introduces him or her self by his or her spiritual name(s) and says "*hau mitakuyapi*" ("my relatives"), then they make their pledge. According to the teachings, the pledge is made to the Creator and the individual is duty bound to fulfil their pledge or suffer the consequences. Their pledge may be a commitment to dance, to pierce, to help out in the cooking area, to donate food, money, or other items necessary for the sundance, to be a



firekeeper, to help build the lodge, set up tipis, supply firewood, or to make some other commitment. There is so much involved in hosting a sundance that it could not be accomplished without widespread community support, affirming the communities respect for and acknowledgement of the Sundance Chief.

As the date for the first sundance approached, members of the Society met with the Birds Hill Park manager Al Myers at the sundance site and smoked the pipe with him. For the members of the Society, smoking the sacred channunpa blesses the site, connects them to the land, and creates a special relationship, a brotherhood/sisterhood with all those who smoke the pipe. Mr. Myers was extremely helpful and offered to arrange to have his work crew cut the poplar tree shoots that were needed for the shade at the sundance arbour. He also made sure that White Buffalo had the necessary permit to cut trees, from a nearby forest, for the sundance arbour, tipi poles, sweatlodges, and pipe stands. Shortly after the meeting with Mr. Myers, White Buffalo built a sweatlodge and began holding sweats to prepare the people and to bless the grounds. Ongoing sweats at this site continued to be held throughout the year following each sundance. The proximity to the sundance site carries a special meaning for the sweats, related directly to sacred space. The sweat lodge itself is a very sacred space, but it's proximity to the sundance grounds gives it a heightened sacrality, often described as a flowing of energy between the sweatlodge and the sundance lodge.

As mentioned earlier, a process of increasing sanctification began when the pipe was first smoked at the selected site. From the moment that the pipe was smoked until the actual start of the dancing there was an unfolding of increasing sacrality; increasing sacrality because from the Dakota perspective there is no such thing as profane land. When examining sacred space from a Dakota and indeed Aboriginal perspective in general, Mircea Eliade's sacred/profane dichotomy does not so easily fit. From the Aboriginal perspective, all of creation is essentially sacred or *wakq*. All that exists is part of *Wakq Tąka* (the Great Holy or Great Sacred or Great Mystery, the Totality). At the same time, it is acknowledged that there are places that are *nina wakq*, very sacred, or,



one might say, super sacred. If something is *nina waka*, it has a special quality to it that makes it very sacred. Unique places like the pipestone quarry in southwestern Minnesota are viewed as having that quality, as are the Black Hills, Bear Butte (a famous vision quest site), special rock formations, or a huge boulder in the middle of the prairies. The entire earth is *makoca wakan*, sacred land. By virtue of a sundance occurring, the sundance site at Birds Hill Park is *nina waka*. If a meter existed to gauge levels of sacredness, it would peak when the centre cottonwood tree is erected. As noted earlier, smoking the pipe blessed the site and regular sweats held at the site continued the process of blessing the grounds. The process of building the sundance lodge itself brings the site yet a step closer to peak sacrality. The lodge, once constructed, will be used for one four year cycle, with only the centre tree being replaced annually. At the end of the four year cycle the lodge is burned and a new one built for another four year cycle.

Sundancers, helpers, and supporters gradually arrive and set up their tents and trailers over the days preceding the sundance. Accommodating the modern work week, the ceremony itself will run from Wednesday to Sunday. Wednesday is known as “Camp Day/Wiping Away the Tears Day.” The Wiping Away the Tears Ceremony is a memorial ceremony which takes place at the Dakota Eagle Sundance two days before the sundancing begins. The Wiping Away the Tears ceremony concludes with a big feast. Protocols and procedures regarding sacred feasts vary between the different First Nations. Generally, however, people are instructed not to refuse food that is offered to them and not to waste any of the food. Also, typically, before the people eat the food, the food is smudged (purified with burning sweetgrass, for example), and a tiny portion of all of the foodstuffs is put in a bowl, referred to as a spirit dish. An Elder prays with the food and offers it to the Creator and the natural powers of the universe, including the spirits of relatives who have passed on to the spirit world. According to the traditional teachings, the spirits consume the spiritual part of the food and the humans the material part and the living once again sit down to eat at a meal with their relatives who are in the spirit world. There is more food than the people can eat and they are encouraged to fill

their plastic containers and eat the food later or take it to family and community members who can't make it out to the feast. The evening concludes with the singers singing a wopida (thank-you) song and everyone forming a circle, joining hands, and dancing clockwise.

Thursday is known as "Tree Day" because it is the day that the camp goes to retrieve the huge cottonwood tree that will be erected at the centre of the sundance lodge. The tree has been selected ahead of time and a ceremony is performed by those who have selected the tree. On Tree Day everybody gathers in the sundance lodge and waits for four scouts to arrive. The people see the scouts in the distance, approaching in a zig-zag fashion, as scouts would do in the old days to give advance warning to the people that they have something significant to report (on the open prairie, the scouts can be seen approaching from a great distance). They appear in front of the Red Blanket Men and the people and report that they have found the enemy (the tree symbolizes a fallen enemy or fallen warrior). The entire camp goes in procession, following the scouts and the Red Blanket Men, including the Sundance Chief, to the tree. The tree is smudged, offered the pipe, and the drum group sings a song for the tree. A war veteran is asked to come forward and talk to the people. Invariably the veteran talks about the tragedy of war and they remember their friends, fellow soldiers who died on the battle field. Next, the four Tree-choppers (young girls who are virgins and have not yet had their first moontime) come forward and one by one they hit the tree with their hatchet, each one delivering a blow in one of the four directions. Once the Tree-choppers complete their symbolic act the men take turns chopping the tree down with an axe. The sundance men who are piercing tie their ropes to the trees that lie in the direction that the sundance tree will fall, catching it so that it does not touch the ground. Everyone gives a cheer, women honour the tree by making the honour sound (li-li-li-li)<sup>2</sup> and men make a whooping sound. The men place poles underneath the tree and hoist it onto their shoulders, the women gather branches that have fallen off, and the procession make their way back to the sundance lodge. They stop four times along the way, never letting the tree touch the ground, and the singers sing a veteran song at each stop. As they reach the east

entrance to the sundance lodge the women lay their shawls down on the ground between the logs that have been placed in the lodge for the tree to rest on before being erected. If the tree was to fall off the logs, the shawls would keep it from falling on the ground, a highly symbolic act symbolizing the role of women as protectors of the Nation. While the tree is resting on the logs a veteran is asked to apply red paint to the tree's "wounds," places where branches were trimmed off, the men who are piercing tie their ropes to the tree, a long piece of red cloth is tied to one of the top branches, and a rawhide bundle (containing a piece of dried pemmican, an awl, sinew, a knife, and an arrowhead) is tied in a crotch at the top of the tree. The bundle has a rawhide cutout of a man tied to one end and a rawhide cutout of a buffalo tied on the other end, both are painted red and both have an exaggerated penis, symbolizing the fertility and prosperity that the dancers are praying for. Food and tobacco offerings are placed in the hole and the tree is hoisted up and positioned. Once the tree is in place the drum group sings a few songs while everyone shuffles around the dance area picking up any sticks or thorns that the dancers might step on. The final step in constructing the sacred space involves placing parallel rows of prayer sticks around the perimeter of the dance area and setting up the "gates" in the four directions. The prayer sticks are about two feet long, painted red, and have a pinch of tobacco wrapped in red cloth tied to the crotch at the top of the stick. The completed site is quite impressive.

With the sacred space completely constructed everyone assembles at the open field beside the sundance lodge for the feast. For the dancers, this will be the last time that they eat or drink until the sundance is finished on Sunday afternoon. Meanwhile, the helpers, supporters, and spectators will continue to have a feast at the end of each day. After the feast on Thursday the sundancers gather the items that they will need for the sundance and take them into the tipi that they will stay in until Sunday night. Once the dancers enter into the sundance area they stay there until the dance is finished on Sunday evening. They are told that are no longer in ordinary time and space, they are in a spiritual state and are not to talk or communicate with anyone outside of the lodge area. After they drop their stuff off in the tipi the sundancers

all participate in a sweatlodge ceremony. After the sweat, they try to get a good night sleep. They will be up again before sunrise, have another sweat and dance for several rounds throughout the day. The dancers will have a sweat in the evening, sleep, and repeat this daily procedure until Sunday late afternoon-early evening when White Buffalo Calf Woman departs. Her departure at the end of the dance on Sunday afternoon is an emotional time for the dancers.

The sundance historically was held around the time of the summer solstice. Groups of extended families would join together in one big encampment to give thanks to all of creation for the blessings that have been bestowed upon the people and through prayer and self-sacrifice to ask for continued blessings in the coming year. There were many other ceremonies that were also done at the time of the annual gathering. Furthermore, the fact that many people were gathered in one place made it a major social occasion and a time to make plans for the coming year. The Dakota Eagle Sundance at Birds Hill Provincial Park was held around the third week in August. The third week in August date was chosen by Calvin Pompana to commemorate the birth of "Miracle," the sacred white buffalo born on August 20, 1994 on the Heider farm at Janesville, Wisconsin (<http://www.homestead.com/WhiteBuffaloMiracle/>). The birth of Miracle is connected to Dakota prophecy and is of great significance to Aboriginal people, in general, across North America. Arvol Looking Horse, the 19th generation keeper of the sacred pipe that, according to Lakota tradition, was brought to the people by White Buffalo Calf Woman, says that the white buffalo is the spirit of White Buffalo Calf Woman standing on the earth again ([http://www.homestead.com/WhiteBuffaloMiracle/Miracle\\_Chief-Arvol.html](http://www.homestead.com/WhiteBuffaloMiracle/Miracle_Chief-Arvol.html)). White Buffalo Calf Spirit Woman (*Tatąka Ska Wįya*) is an extremely important figure in Lakota religious history, equivalent in significance to Dakota people as Jesus is to Christians or Buddha is to Buddhists. The oral teachings state that *Tatąka Ska Wįya* is the spirit *Woope* (the beauty), the daughter of the spirit *Ską* (the sky). She came to earth to bring the people the gift of the sacred pipe (*čanyupa*) and the seven sacred teachings, the core of Dakota religion (*wiçoni*).<sup>3</sup>

*Tatąka Ska Wįya* is central to the Dakota Eagle Sundance; the cere-

mony begins with her arrival and ends with her departure. It is my understanding that the love and respect that one has towards Tataka Ska Wiya, and towards one another at the sundance, are cultural ideals that should be extended to daily life. The dancers refer to one another as “lodge brothers” and “lodge sisters.” In ones relationship with ones husband or wife or significant other, one should treat that person as one would treat a brother or sister, with love and respect.

The sundance is thought of as a very powerful ceremony which strips away ones ego, leaving one humble and open to messages from the creator. Through fasting and other forms of self-sacrifice the sundancers make themselves *uška*, pitiful, with the hope that the creator will show pity on them by answering their prayers and granting them blessings. The sundancers, ideally, become exemplars of cultural values such as preparation, commitment, fortitude, generosity, love, and respect. Ideally, the sundancer and everyone should extend the values and principles inherent in the sundance to their everyday life.

There are two main components to the Birds Hill Sundance: the ceremony itself and the associated activities. The associated activities primarily have an educational focus. The visitors, including Aboriginal children and youth groups, are educated about the sundance and Aboriginal culture through workshops and teaching lodges. Children and youth programming is an extremely important part of the event. Through storytelling, arts and crafts workshops, trips to the beach, and other activities, White Buffalo hopes that the children and youth remember their visit to the sundance as a very special time. It is their hope that Aboriginal children and youth will leave with a sense of pride in their heritage and through meeting positive role models, establish a support network and realize that there are alternatives to joining gangs or ruining their lives through drugs and alcohol.

Another important associated activity is a “moonlodge” area to honour women on their moontime (menstruating). The women look after this area, especially older women who are past menopause. The women in this area conduct moontime ceremonies and are given teachings about women’s issues. One of the women’s teachings is that women on their moontime are not permitted around the sundance, sweatlodge, or

other area. According to what I have heard men and women traditional teachers say about this teaching, women are believed to be extremely powerful, spiritually, when on their time. As a result, they say that their power can disrupt and even drain the power of the ceremony. They maintain that this is not a teaching invented by men to control women but that it is a woman's teaching, by and for women. It is a time when women are exempt from their duties and chores, a time for women to be with other women to focus on their own well-being. Visitors are taught that in the traditional way, women are honoured and respected.

The story of the coming of White Buffalo Calf Spirit Woman states that she came in the four colours (black, red, yellow and white) which correspond symbolically to the four colours of humans on this earth. As a result, the teachings stress that the gifts brought by the White Buffalo Calf Spirit Woman are for everyone. The proximity of Birds Hill Park to the city of Winnipeg provides a location close to home and an opportunity for family, friends and neighbours to celebrate together. People come from across Canada and the United States to dance or participate in whatever way they choose. Everyone is welcome, but they must be respectful of the etiquette. White Buffalo prepared a pamphlet to be distributed to visitors unfamiliar with the rules and ethics of the sundance. White Buffalo representatives feel that the sundance and sweatlodge site is an added attraction for Park visitors, important for providing cultural awareness and bridging the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. White Buffalo estimated that well over a thousand people visited the sundance and sweatlodge site over the eight years of the sundance. It has been their experience that most non-Aboriginal Manitobans are genuinely appreciative of and interested in learning about Aboriginal culture. White Buffalo notes that they have people from the four symbolic colours of humans (red, black, yellow, and white) attend and/or participate in the sundance and sweatlodge ceremonies. People of all ages and from all walks of life have attended the sweatlodge and sundance ceremonies; including many inner-city youth and former inmates of Stony Mountain Institute, and Headingly Correctional Institute who are seeking an alternative to the gang lifestyle. Some of the community organizations that have brought peo-

ple to the sweatlodge and sundance ceremonies for healing, include: Children of the Earth High School, Choices Youth (representing 5 inner city schools), Probation Services, Manitoba Aboriginal Youth Career Awareness Committee, Macdonald Youth Services, Aggasiz Youth Centre, University of Winnipeg, University of Manitoba, Indian and Métis Friendship Centre of Winnipeg, Aboriginal Gang Initiative, Urban Circle Training Program, Patal Training Centre, and even an international group of psychologist in Winnipeg for a conference on pain. In addition to those who come to attend the ceremonies, hikers, skiers, and other visitors to the Park often stop by out of curiosity and ask questions about what they are doing. White Buffalo members always welcome them, explain a bit about the sweatlodge and sundance, and extend an open invitation to them if they ever want to experience a sweatlodge ceremony.

In planning the Birds Hill Park Sundance, White Buffalo expressed how honoured they were by the extremely positive support and encouragement that they received from employees of the Department of Parks and Natural Areas. Unfortunately, the relationship has deteriorated over the years. Some members of White Buffalo felt that the problems started when the Park manager Al Myers, with whom they initially worked with, was replaced by another Park manager whom they felt was not as supportive. Park officials, on the other hand, were upset that White Buffalo built a structure covering the sweatlodge, when they were instructed not to build any permanent structure. White Buffalo countered that the structure is semi-permanent and that covering the lodge is necessary to keep the old people warm when they come to the sweatlodge in the winter months. Park officials noted that some visitors to the Park felt that the sweatlodge site looked untidy and rundown. White Buffalo maintained that the people that complained were non-Aboriginal people who did not want “Indians” invading “their” Park. Some members of White Buffalo are insulted that they have to ask the Government for permission to hold ceremonies in their First Nation homeland. At one point, the Park went so far as blocking access to the site by piling snow at the entrance, making it difficult for the sweats to continue as the helpers had to haul wood, rocks, and Elders by toboggan. Another issue came



up over the fire ban in the park. The Park manager wanted the sacred fire extinguished. Yet, the fire is a central part of the ceremony and it must stay lit for four days before, four days during, and four days after the sundance. It is the sacred duty of the firekeepers to keep the fire burning even if there is a torrential downpour. Mr. Pompana tried to reassure the Park manager by reminding him that they have been doing ceremonies there for four years and they never had a fire. The Park manager persisted until, according to Mr. Pompana, Mr. Pompana finally threatened to phone the Minister responsible for Parks.

Currently, the White Buffalo Spiritual Society as an organization is restructuring. The former President and founder, Calvin Pompana, has stepped down in order to pursue other initiatives, mainly the development of a drop-in centre for the homeless in Winnipeg, the majority of who are Aboriginal. The sundance at Birds Hill Park is “resting” right now, until another Red Blanket Man, his family, and supporters step forward to begin another cycle. Meanwhile, the dance has moved back to Merritt, British Columbia where Calvin’s older brother Alden Pompana sponsored an Eagle Sundance in the mid-1990s.

There are outstanding issues in the establishment of this sacred site. White Buffalo understand the site as a sacred site but it is seeking formal recognition by the provincial government. Calvin Pompana, although no longer a member of White Buffalo still wants to see a professionally built, aesthetically pleasing permanent structure replace the semi-permanent “shack” that was originally built over the sweatlodge. He, and others, would like to see the road paved and a paved parking lot built, not on as grand a scale as other sites in the Park (for example, where the riding stable is located), but something that would allow access year round. As Mr. Pompana says, the ceremonies are important for re-establishing people’s connection to and respect for the land.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The Sundance at Birds Hill Park was held at the end of August to coincide with the anniversary of the birth of the Sacred White Buffalo “Miracle” that was born in Janesville, Wisconsin on August 20th, 1994; the sundance celebrates and honours its birth. More importantly, the sundance honours the sacred White Buffalo Calf Spirit Woman (Tataḡa

Ska Wiya) who brought the sacred pipe and the seven sacred teachings to the people. One of the seven teachings brought by Tataka Ska Wiya was the Sundance ceremony. The sundance is one of the most important ceremonies for Dakota people, it is held partly, as Arthur Amiotte notes, to honour the sun as one of the most waka hierophanies (1985), partly to acknowledge or re-establish the inter-relatedness of all things, and partly to request blessings from the Creator and the natural powers of the universe. It is often said that the ultimate reason for holding a sundance is “so that others may live,” “so that the world will continue.” People are asking for *wicozani washte*, good life, health and happiness. As Calvin Pompana says, it is a ceremony of sacrificing oneself for the well-being of others who are at various stages of illness, helping the people in four aspects of the self: physical, mental, emotional and spiritual. The ceremony is also a way that people honour and thank the Creator and all of creation for giving life (*wicozani washte*). The underlying principles of the sundance are prayer, sacrifice, thanksgiving, and healing. According to Dakota traditional teachers, all of creation is waka (sacred, holy, mystery) but there are certain things that are nina waka (very sacred). The sundance ceremony itself is viewed as being nina waka. The site at which a sundance is held is nina waka. As people gather at a sundance site to begin a sundance, there is an ongoing process of increasing sacralization peaking when the centre tree is erected, when the dancing starts, and when White Buffalo Calf Spirit Woman arrives. The fact that a sundance took place at Birds Hill Provincial Park makes the site a sacred space. For the sundancers and the people who follow the sundance way of life, the site of the Birds Hill Park Dakota Eagle Sundance will always be viewed as a sacred site. They will continue to seek recognition from the Province of Manitoba to have the site designated as a sacred site so that ceremonies can continue to be held, at this special place where the daughter of Waka Taka set foot, in perpetuity.

## Notes

1. I have maintained the original iteration when quoting sources, otherwise, Dakota words are spelled utilizing the following phonetic symbols: ç is pronounced ch; š is pronounced sh; ą is a nasalized a; ĭ is a nasalized i; and ȳ is a nasalized u. I have not indicated stress, aspiration, or glottal stops.

2. Amiotte calls this “the tremolo” (1987, 82) and I have heard others refer to it as “keening.” It is interesting that this sound is made by women in other cultures as an honour cry. I have seen Hindu women do it upon the arrival of the grooms wedding party to the bride’s house. Women in the Islamic tradition also make this sound.
3. For an elaboration of the seven sacred rites, see Brown 1953. For an alternative version of the White Buffalo Calf Woman Story see Crow Dog. For online versions of the White Buffalo Calf Woman story see: <http://www.merceronline.com/Native/native05.htm>, <http://www.kstrom.net/isk/arvol/buffpipe.html>, <http://www.kstrom.net/isk/arvol/lamedeer.html>

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