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Hello and welcome back everyone and welcome to the new members.

I hope you find this both interesting and informative. BlackBear BlackBear@theasylum.com

NATIVE AMERICAN SWEAT LODGE

History of Sweat Lodges



George Catlin's drawing of the Mandan's sweat lodge in 1845.

In one form or another, the sweat bath pervaded cultures from the Alaskan Eskimo south into the land of the Mayans. The purpose, in most cases, went beyond getting the body clean. The sweat bath provided a cure for illness, revitalization for aching muscles, and a sense of racial identity. A Navajo who fought in World War II told me he came back for a sweat bath "to rid himself of evil accumulated during war."

EARLY CHRONICLES

Use of the sweat lodge was chronicled by the earliest settlers in America. In 1665, David DeVries of New York observed Indians "entirely clean and more attractive than before" while sweat bathing. Roger Williams of Rhode Island wrote in 1643: "They use sweating for two ends: first to cleanse their skin; secondly to purge their bodies,

which doubtless is a great means of preserving them, especially from the French disease (probably influenza) which by sweating and some potions, they perfectly and speedily cure."

George Catlin wrote a lengthy description of the Mandan's sweat lodge in 1845, ending with the comment: "Such is the sudatory or vapour bath of the Mandans, and, as I before observed, it is resorted to both as an everyday luxury by those who have the time and energy to indulge in it; and also used by the sick as a remedy for nearly all the diseases which are known amongst them. Fevers are very rare, and in fact almost unknown amongst these people: but in the few cases of fever which have been known, this treatment has been applied, and without the fatal consequences which we would naturally predict. This custom is similar amongst nearly all of these Missouri Indians and amongst the Pawnees, Omahas, and Punchas and other tribes."

In his book, *Travels Through the Interior Parts of North America* (1766-68), Captain J. Carver, observing Native American customs, wrote:

"Pains and weaknesses in the stomach and the breast are sometimes the result of their long fasting and consumptions of the excessive fatigue and violent exercises they expose themselves to from infancy, before they have strength to support them. But the disorder to which they are most subject is plueresy; for the removal of which, they apply their grand remedy and preventative against the generality of their complaints, sweating."

Nevertheless, the white man saw the sweat lodge, with its sacred and religious implications, as a threat. Even after the Indians were subdued, Christian missionaries and government officials systematically denied use of the sweat lodge, interrupting a continuity that lasted thousands of years. Enforcement depended upon how great a threat they felt from a particular tribe.

The Sioux, who stubbornly fought white man's attempt to "civilize" them, were punished by Indian police for simply entering the sweat lodge. More docile tribes gave up sweat lodge rituals voluntarily. In other regions, such as Mexico, sweat bathing continued without interruption as long as certain elements offensive to the Spanish conquerors were abandoned. In areas where influence of white culture was less intense, a more tolerant attitude prevailed and sweat bathing continued. This explains the integrity of my experience with the Navajos, and why the Crows of Montana, who served as scouts for the Army, have continued the practice without interruption to this day.

CULTURAL REVIVAL

My experience with the Ogala Sun Dance ceremony grows from a cultural revival now sweeping the Native American community. Wounded Knee, Alcatraz, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs takeover come to mind as urgent manifestations of this need for identity. Many Indian groups, such as the National Indian Unity, are reviving use of the sweat lodge in their annual conferences. Three basic forms of the sweat bath are indigenous to North America: the hot rock method, used by the Navajos and Sioux; the direct fire chamber, heated by blazing logs; and a more sophisticated type relying on a heating duct system believed to be of Mayan origin.

Hot Rock Sweat Lodge



The most popular form of sweat bathing among North American Indians was the hot rock method and its variations. These were used exclusively by tribes in the central plains, the southwest, the Great Basin and the eastern woodlands. Whether permanent, temporary or portable, they were smaller than other Indian structures, and usually

domed and sometimes oblong. Nomadic tribes drove pliant boughs, such as willow, into the ground and arched them into a hemisphere, secured with withes. Stationary tribes used more substantial materials--logs and heavy bark. Temporary sweat lodges were covered with blankets or skins, while the permanent types were sealed with mud or sod. In either case, a depression was dug near the door or in the center to cradle the rocks, which were heated outside and brought in on forked sticks. Steam was produced by sprinkling the rocks from a straw broom or a hollowed buffalo horn. Although simple to build, every detail was symbolic.

WOMB OF MOTHER EARTH

The Sioux, for example, see the interior of the sweat lodge as representing the womb of Mother Earth, its darkness as human ignorance, the hot stones as the coming of life, and the hissing steam as the creative force of the universe being activated. The entrance faces east, source of life and power, dawn of wisdom, while the fire heating the rocks is the undying light of the world, eternity.

Sweat lodges were often connected with gods and creation. In the lore of the Wintu tribe of California it is said that Ollebis, the creator, built a great and awesome sweat house, its middle support being a huge white oak, with various kinds of oaks being side supports and flowering plants serving as binding and sides. Then, as the house began to grow wider and higher, it became wonderful in size and splendor. Just as daylight was coming, the house was finished and ready. It stood in the morning dawn, a mountain of beautiful flowers and oak branches; all the colors of the world were on it, inside and out. The center tree had grown far above the top of the house, filled with acorns; a few of them had fallen on every side. This sweat house was placed there to last forever, the largest and most beautiful building in the world, above or below. Nothing like it will ever be built again. The Maidu's story of Creation begins with a sweat in the dancehouse. "The Great Spirit made two dolls of clay and laid them on the floor. The Great Spirit then lay beside them and sweated so long that the dolls turned into living people."

WHEN SWEAT LODGE WAS HUMAN

The following story (my favorite) personifies the sweat lodge as the powerful friend and leader of the "Animal People." Like most tribes in colder climates, the Nez Perce Indians spent long winters in tipis, earth and brush lodges and, of course, sweat lodges. This was a time for legends and storytelling.

Origin of the Sweat Lodge is translated in "Legends Told by the old People," a Good Medicine book: Long ago, in the days of the Animal People, Sweat Lodge was a man. He foresaw the coming of Human Beings, the real inhabitants of the Earth. So one day he called all the Animal People together to give each one a name and to tell him his duties. In the council, the Sweat Lodge stood up and made a speech:

"We have lived on Earth for a long while, but we shall not be in our present condition much longer. A different People are coming to live here. We must part from each other and go to different places. Each of you must decide whether you wish to belong to the Animal beings that walk, fly or creep or those that swim. You may now make your choice." Then Sweat Lodge turned to Elk. "You will first come this way, Elk. What do you wish to be?" "I wish to be what I am--an Elk." "Let us see you run or gallop," said Sweat Lodge. So Elk galloped off in a graceful manner, and returned. "You are right," decided Sweat Lodge. "You are an Elk." Elk galloped off, and the rest saw no more of him. Sweat Lodge called Eagle and asked, "What do you wish to be, Eagle?" "Just what I am--an Eagle." "Let us see you fly," replied Sweat Lodge.

Eagle flew, rising higher and higher with hardly a ripple on his outstretched wings. Sweat Lodge called him back and said, "You are an Eagle. You will be king over all the Birds of the Air. You will soar in the Sky. You will live on the crags and peaks of the highest Mountains. Human Beings will admire you." Eagle flew away happy. Everyone watched him disappear in the Sky. "I wish to be like Eagle," Bluejay told Sweat Lodge. Wanting to give everyone a chance, Sweat Lodge said again, "Then let us see you fly." Bluejay tried to imitate the easy, graceful flight of Eagle, but failed to keep his balance and was soon flapping his wings. Sweat Lodge called him back. "A Jay is a Jay. You will have to be content as you are." When Bear came forward, Sweat Lodge said, "You will be known among Human Beings as a very fierce Animal. You will kill and eat People, and they will fear you."

Bear went off into the woods and has since been known as a fierce animal. Then to all walking creatures, except Coyote, and to all flying creatures, to all Animals and Birds, all Snakes, Frogs, Turtles and Fish, Sweat Lodge gave names, and the creatures scattered. After they were gone, Sweat Lodge called Coyote to him and said, "You have been wise and cunning. You have been a man to be feared. When this Earth becomes like the air, empty and void, your name shall last forever. The new Human Beings who come will hear your name and say, 'Yes, Coyote was great in his time.' Now, what do you wish to

be?" "I have long lived as a Coyote," he replied. "I want to be noble like Eagle or Elk or Cougar." Sweat Lodge let him show what he could do. First, Coyote tried his best to fly like Eagle, but could only jump around, this way and that. Then he tried to imitate Elk in his graceful gallop. He succeeded for a short distance, but soon fell into his own gait. He stopped short and looked around. "You look exactly like yourself, Coyote," laughed Sweat Lodge. "You will be a Coyote." Poor Coyote ran off, howling, to some unknown place. Before he got out of sight he stopped, turned his head and stood--just like a coyote.

Sweat Lodge, left alone, spoke to himself: "All now are gone, and the new People will be coming soon. When they arrive they should find something to give them strength and power. "I will place myself on the ground, for the use of Human Beings who are to come. Whoever visits me now and then, to him I will give power. He will become great in war and great in peace. He will have success in fishing and in hunting. To all who come to me for protection, I will give strength and power." Sweat Lodge spoke with earnestness. Then he lay down on his hands and knees and waited for the first People. He has lain that way ever since and has given power to all who sought it from him.

PEYOTE AND SACRED MYTHS

The sweat bath often accompanied other rituals. The Utes of the Southwest, for example, preceded their peyote ceremony with a fast and a sweat to purify their body, while peyote released evil from their souls. Cherokee priests, custodians of sacred myths, were allowed to recite them only in the sanctum of the sweat lodge. Their knowledge was not for everyone to hear. They would meet at night in a sweat lodge and discuss the inner knowledge among themselves. In one of the Omaha Indians' chants, the sweat lodge rock is called "Grandsire" or "Aged One." The stones symbolized the state of being, immovable and steadfast, "dwelling place" of all. The Fox Indians believed the spirit Manitou dwelled in the stones of the sweat lodge.

An old Fox Indian told this: Often one will cut one's self only through the skin. It is done to open up many passages for the Manitou to pass into the body. It comes from his abode in the stone, roused by the heat of the fire, and proceeds out of the stone when water is sprinkled on it. It comes out in the steam and enters the body wherever it finds entrance. It moves up and down, and all over and inside the body, driving out everything that inflicts pain. Before the Manitou returns to the stone, it imparts some of its nature to the body. That is why one feels so well after having been in the sweat lodge. Preparation for

the sweat bath and its indulgence followed traditional disciplines, often conducted by a medicine man. The Kiowa built their sweat lodge with a framework of twelve reeds, other tribes used more. The number of stones varied, but five or six were common. Some tribes cooled off in snow and sand (as the Navajos) while others plunged into lakes and streams. Buffalo tails and eagle wings were often used for whipping the body, much like the Finnish vihta or the Russian vennik.



Direct Fire Sweat Lodge

The hot air bath of upper California depicted by Alexander Forbes in the early 1880s Alaskan Eskimos, some Pacific Coast tribes and the Pueblo Indians in the Southwest built lodges heated directly by fire. They were usually large enough to accommodate dozens of men. (Women were rarely allowed inside these "men's clubs.") A small pilot fire was kept burning most of the day. After hours of talk, gossip and dancing the fire was fed to a noble size, the lodge became torrid and sweating began. Although caustic smoke filled the air, these people made no effort to convert to the hot rock method, though they surely knew of this alternative. Without stoves or chimneys, a blazing central fire was the simplest way to convert a men's club into a sudatorium. When the smoke became unbearable, the men would simply lie flat on the floor and breathe fresher air.

Hoopa is a small lumber community on the bank of the lower Trinity River. In early morning and evening when moisture condenses, a mist of mill smoke and dew veils the town. The Hoopa, Yuork, Karok, Wiyot

and Tolowa lived comfortably in this area for centuries, fishing for salmon and eel, foraging wild acorns--and sweat bathing. I visited Jimmy Jackson, a middle-aged Hoopa Indian and his 89-year-oldmother. He told me the sweat lodge has been rarely used since he was a kid." We only use the sweat lodge during the Jump Dance ceremony. I remember watching men of the tribe enter through an opening in the gabled roof that nearly reached the ground. They would go through a trap door in the roof and climb down a pole ladder into the pit. The fire was in the center, surrounded by a hearth of flat river stones. They would rest on cedar boughs and wooden pillows and take turns stoking the fire.

The best hunters and warriors had the privilege of gathering firewood and would compete to see who could carry the most wood. After the men had sweat, they would slide out through a hole on the north side, slippery like eels, and plunge into the river. There they would grab a heavy rock and see who could walk the furthest along the river bed."

Jimmy's mother said women rarely took sweat baths. "We might enter the lodge during a particular ceremony, like the death purification ritual, when the building wasn't being used as a sweat lodge."

Women respected the sweat lodge as a man's place where they could be by themselves. "We rarely saw our men at night, they spent so much time in the sweat lodge. You might say it worked as a birth control device."

Why were some tribes more inclined to use the direct fire method than others? Although they were geographically far flung, they had in common the leisure to enjoy communal companionship in a casual atmosphere.

Eskimo men endured long dark winters in the glowing warmth of a sweat lodge while carving spears or knotting nets for the coming spring. Pacific Coast Indians, living in the land of plenty with an abundance of game, berries and nuts, had the leisure to be sociable.

Pueblo men, with advanced farming techniques learned from the Aztecs, and with domesticated flocks of turkeys, herds of cattle, trained eagles, were assured of ample food and were left with leisure too. They spent much time in the kiva, their ceremonial house, which often became a sweat lodge when enough wood was fed on the central fire.

The Eskimos used the kashim as their social and religious center. It was a rectangular wooden structure, large enough to house bachelors and male travelers and as a clubhouse for married men. They were dug partially underground, insulated with dirt or sod with a single tunnel entrance and a small hole in the roof for smoke to escape. This style plank house was found along the Pacific Coast as far south as northern California.

Central Alaskan Eskimos, lacking timber, never built sweat lodges. Aleutian Eskimos never built the sweat lodge until it was introduced by Russian traders in the early 18th century. Until recently, coastal Eskimos held a festival every autumn to honor the ribbon seal. Preparations lasted a month. During this time men lived in the kashim apart from the women. During the day the men danced, composed songs and planned their winter hunts. Come evening, they would stoke a big fire and create a fierce heat. They emerged, dripping with sweat, rolled themselves in the snow and doused themselves with icy water.

In 1899, Edward Nelson observed Eskimos of the Bering Straits and their very curious method of cleaning:

"In these buildings (kashim) sweat baths are taken by men and boys at intervals of a week or ten days during the winter. Every man has a small urine tub near his place, where this liquid is saved for use in bathing. A portion of the floor in the center of the room is made of planks so arranged that it can be taken up, exposing a pit beneath, in which a fire of drift logs is built. When the smoke has passed off and the wood is reduced to a bed of coals, a cover is put over the smoke hole in the roof and the men sit naked about the room until they are in profuse perspiration; they then bathe in the urine, which combines with the oil on their bodies, and thus takes the place of soap, after which they go outside and pour water over their bodies until they become cool. While bathing they remain in the kashim with the temperature so high that their skin becomes shining red and appears to be almost at the point of blistering; then going outside they squat about in the snow perfectly nude, and seem to enjoy the contrasting temperature. On several occasions I saw them go from the sweat bath to holes in the ice on neighboring streams and squatting there, pour ice water over their backs and shoulders with a wooden dipper, apparently experiencing the greatest pleasure from the operation.

Nelson also observed a clever way of protecting the lungs from the caustic smoke: "Owing to the intense heat generated in the fire pit, the bathers, who are always males, are obliged to use respirators to

protect their lungs. These are made of fine shavings of willow or spruce bound into the form of an oblong pad formed to cover the mouth, the chin, and a portion of the cheeks. These pads are convex externally and concave within; crossing the concave side is a small wooden rod, either round or square, so that the wearer can grasp it in his teeth and thus hold the respirator in position."

The Indians in central and southern California built direct fire sweatlodges called temescals. (The Spaniards brought the word north with them from the Aztecs.)

"In the center of the rancheria was the temescal," wrote George Redding in 1880 for the *Californian*, describing the life of the north Central Valley tribe, the Wintu. "It was constructed by digging a large circular basin-shaped hole in the ground, four or five feet deep. Large posts were sunk around the edge of this hole, about five feet apart, which extend upward to the top of the ground. In the center are planted four large tree trunks, with the original limbs on them, extending a few feet above the surface. From these four trees the roof supports are firmly fastened by withes to the branches at the center of the trees. The whole cover is then thatched with pine and willow brush, and covered with a layer of earth about a foot in thickness. The entrance is a long, low passage, and made by driving short, thin pine posts side by side, about three feet apart, covered in the same manner as the house proper."

Most California sweat lodges could be described as above, even the kivas of the Southwest had essentially the same design. However, the kivas differed only in that some were rectangular and lined inside with fine masonry. (I am told modern Pueblos are now using the hot rock method instead of a direct fire. Perhaps, this is a result of a cultural exchange that began centuries ago when the Apache and Navaho tribes migrated from the north and mingled with the Pueblo people.) Although less spiritual attachment was placed on the direct fire sweatlodges vis-a-vis most hot rock sweats, they were still considered a powerful remedy for all ills.

In California during early 1800s, Alexander Forbes wrote:

"The Indians, in their natural state, are very healthy, notwithstanding their filthy habits. It is very far otherwise in their domesticated state. Both with the wild and domesticated tribes, the hot-air bath, or temescal, is the sovereign remedy for most of their diseases. This is administered in the following manner. A round hovel or oven of mud is

built for the purpose. It has a small opening in the side to enter by, and a smaller one at the top for the escape of the smoke. Several persons enter this at the same time, quite naked, and make a fire close to the door, on the inside. They continue to add fresh wood to the fire as long as they can bear the heat. This soon throws them into a profuse perspiration over their whole frame. They wring their hair, (says Captain Beechey) and scrape their skin with a sharp piece of wood or iron hoop, in the same manner as coachhorses are sometimes treated when they come in heated, and they plunge into a river or pond of cold water, which they always take care shall be near the temescal."

Another description of California sweating comes from Stephen Powers in 1877:

" . . . their panacea was the sweat house. Mr. While relates that he once ventured an experiment in one of these sweating dungeons out of curiosity and in despair (sic) over a neuralgia, for the healing of which he had suffered many things by many physicians and had spent all that he had, and was nothing bettered, but rather grew worse. The first time he was well-nigh suffocated by the dense and bitter smudge made by the green wood. For two hours he lay with his face pressed close to the ground, with a wet handkerchief over his nostrils (the Indians purposely build the fire close to the door, so they cannot escape (sic) until it burns down) and it was a wonder to himself that he lived through it. But he was much benefited that he made a second trial of it, and was quite cured."



Origin of the Temescal

Aztec sweat house from Codex Magliabecchi While Rome was building her Empire, the Mayans were building theirs. Their civilization covered most of Guatemala and extended into central Mexico. The Maya matched nearly all that Rome was known for; their arts and sciences were advanced, they developed their own script and numbering systems, they studied the stars. Even their architecture was outstanding. And, as in the Roman Empire, they built sweat baths throughout their domain.

We have no original descriptions of the ancient Maya sweat houses, however. Much of the early period is veiled behind undeciphered hieroglyphics. Only through archeological diggings and observations of Mayan descendants can we infer that the sweat house was a common characteristic of the ancient Maya. Recent excavations at Piedras Negras, Chichen Itza and El Paraiso have uncovered sweat house ruins, some believed to be over 1200 years old. Though crumbled brick and potshards can tell us little of sweat house rites and ceremonies, the layout of the ruins gives us some idea of importance.

When the Spaniards arrived in the 16th century, they found spirited use of the sweat house among scattered Mayan tribes and their new rulers, the Aztecs. The most common name for the sweat house is temescal, an Aztec name from teme, to bathe, and calli, house. The largest Mayan dictionary, compiled shortly after the Conquest, gives the word for sweat bath as Zumpul-che, "a bath for women after childbirth and for sick persons used to cast out disease in their bodies." The Spaniards did not appreciate the elaborate bathing practices of these people. Spain wallowed in the dark ages of sanitation when it was the vogue not to bathe at all. The Queen of Aragon boasted she had bathed only twice in her life, once when she was born and once when she was married.

The Spanish Inquisition was at its height and the native bathing rituals, combined with worship of gods not sanctioned by the Roman Catholic Church, made sweat houses doubly offensive.

Later, as Spanish missionaries prevailed upon the Aztecs and Mayans to divest their baths of religious significance, the Spaniards began to appreciate the powers of the temescal. In the 16th century, a Spanish priest expressed his contempt for the native bath in this note: "This is a picture of the baths of the Indians which they call 'temazcalli.' At the door is an Indian who was the mediator for illnesses. When a sick

person took a bath he offered incense, which they term copal, to his idol and stained his skin black in veneration to the idol Tezcatlipoca. Many Indians, men and women, stark naked, took these baths and committed nasty and vile sins within."

In the first written history of Mexico, Brother Duran wrote in 1567: The temescalli is a small hut heated with fire into which at most ten people will fit. One cannot stand and there is hardly place to sit. The door is very low so only one person can go in at a time, creeping on all fours. In the far corner is an oven heated to such an extreme temperature that it is difficult to bear. These baths are hot and dry. The bather sweats profusely, simply from the heat. After sweating thoroughly in the temescalli, the Indians wash themselves with cold water outside so the burning heat of the bath shall not remain in their bones.

For the observer, it seems absolutely dreadful when, after they emerge naked, they wash themselves with ten to twelve jugs of water without fear of harmful effects. Although this seems terribly brutal, it is my opinion this is not so. When the body becomes used to this, it becomes quite natural. Yet if a Spaniard is to try this, he would surely lose his senses or become paralyzed.

In The History of Mexico, 1787, the Italian Francesco Clavigero wrote that the baths of the Mexicans were a powerful remedy and might be useful in Europe to cure rheumatism. He writes: The Temazcalli, or Mexican vapour-bath, is usually built of raw bricks. The form of it is similar to that of ovens for baking bread; but with this difference, that the pavement of the Temazcalli is a little convex, and lower than the surface of the earth, whereas that of most ovens is plain, and a little elevated for the accommodation of the baker. Its greatest diameter is about eight feet, and its greatest height six.

The entrance, like the mouth of an oven, is wide enough to allow a man to creep easily in. In the place opposite to the entrance there is a furnace of stone or raw bricks, with its mouth outwards to receive the fire, and a hole above it to carry off the smoke. The part which unites the furnace to the bath, and which is about two feet and a half square, is shut with a dry stone of Tetzontli, or some other stone porous like it. In the upper part of the vault there is an air hole, like that to the furnace.

This is the usual structure of the Temazcalli, of which we have subjoined a figure; but there are others that are without vault or

furnace, mere little square chambers, yet well covered and defended from the air. When any person goes to bathe, he first lays a mat within the Temazcalli, a pitcher of water, and a bunch of herbs, or leaves of maize. He then causes a fire to be made in the furnace, which is kept burning, until the stones which join the Temazcalli and furnace are quite hot. The person who is to use the bath enters commonly naked, and generally accompanied for the sake of convenience, or on account of infirmity, by one of his domestics.

As soon as he enters, he shuts the entrance close, but leaves the air-hole at the top for a little time open, to let out any smoke which may have been introduced through the chinks of the stone; when it is all out he likewise stops up the air-hole. He then throws water upon the hot stones, from which immediately rises a thick steam to the top of the Temazcalli. While the sick person lies upon the mat, the domestic drives the vapour downwards, and gently beats the sick person, particularly on the ailing part, with the bunch of herbs, which are dipped for a little while in the water of the pitcher, which has then become a little warm.

The sick person falls immediately into a soft and copious sweat, which is increased or diminished at pleasure, according as the case requires. When the evacuation desired is obtained, the vapour is let off, the entrance is cleared, and the sick person clothes himself, or is transported on the mat to his chamber; as the entrance to the bath is usually within some chamber of his habitation.

The Temazcalli has been regularly used in several disorders, particularly in fevers occasioned by costiveness. The Indian women use it commonly after childbirth, and also those persons who have been stung or wounded by any poisonous animal. It is, undoubtedly, a powerful remedy for all those who have occasion to carry off gross humours, and certainly it would be most useful in Italy where the rheumatism is so frequent and afflicting. When a very copious sweat is desired, the sick person is raised up and held in the vapour; as he sweats the more, the nearer he is to it.

The Temazcalli is so common, that in every place inhabited by the Indians there are many of them.

Joining Running Foot in a Navajo Sweat Lodge

"Behave as you would in your white man's church." -Hoskie, a Navajo



Hoskie emerges from the sweatlodge

Of all the world's sweat baths I visited, none have retained the sanctity of the American Sweat lodge. I was privileged to have participated in two very special and dissimilar sweat lodge ceremonies--one with the Navajo, the other with the Ogala Sioux.

JOINING RUNNING FOOT IN A NAVAJO SWEAT LODGE

After a cordial interview with Dave Charlie at the Center for Indian Affairs in Phoenix, I drove 380 miles across the desert to visit his relatives near Gallup. The land of the Navajos is much what it always was, the elements prevailing--barren red dirt, buttes, plateaus, pinons, cedars, their roots clawed into the arid soil, an occasional puff of cloud in the vast blue sky. The Navajo nation holds a territory of 16 million acres across five southwestern states. Its contact with white society is only peripheral. In its heart live old traditions established long before Columbus and Cortez--rain dances, hunting rituals and, most sacred of all, the sweat bath ceremonies. I wasn't sure if they would accept the presence of an Anglo in their sweat lodge, but Dave Charlie had put in a good word for me and had given me some canned goods to deliver. At the hogan I was introduced to Running Foot, the 92 year old Medicine Man, his grandsons and their cousins.



Running Foot, the 92-year-old Navaho medicine man who led our sweat lodge ceremony. Running Foot spoke only in his melodic Navajo tongue, and graciously invited me to join them in the sweat lodge. Grandson Hoskie became my guide and interpreter.

The sweat lodge stood a few hundred yards beyond the hogan. It resembled a giant bee hive--a split cedar frame sunk two feet into the ground and arching four feet high, covered with dark New Mexico earth. These earthen mounds are not uncommon throughout the reservation. A log fire blazed a few feet away. The grandsons tossed in a dozen or so melon-sized rocks brought from a distant mountain. When they glowed red and Running Foot was satisfied they were hot enough, he signalled Hoskie to take his pitchfork and lay them carefully in the northern corner of the lodge where they would ward off the malevolent north wind, carrier of colds and more sinister illnesses. He stripped off his clothes and crawled in. He sat alone for a few minutes until the temperature was right, then called us in.

Hoskie put his hand on my shoulder and said, "Behave as you would in your white man's church." I was the last to enter. Hoskie called back

to his cousins outside to drop the blanket door. In the sudden blackness, I couldn't see my own hands, only the dull, glowing rocks. Vision gone, my other senses sharpened--I keenly felt heat from the radiant rocks baking my skin, the texture of the bark floor cushioning the frozen ground, and the shoulders of the grandsons pressed against me. Mingling sweat streamed from our skins as we sat absorbed in dark silence.

Running Foot began his first chant. The grandsons hummed intermittently as they translated for me. The spirits of Earth, Air and Water were being summoned to weave our bodies and souls with the elements. We were told of the distant time when the Navajo rose from the Underworld and gathered in a tq'ache (sweat lodge) to create chants and hymns to be associated with various stages in life. When the chant ended Hoskie explained that each session in the sweat lodge inspired four chants, each with different significance. The Navajo takes sweat baths in sets of two or four, with a recess outside after each.

The chants were handed down through generations to chosen individuals within the tribe, and Running Foot was the only one here so chosen. A few minutes of silence was suddenly broken by a loud crack as he poured a brew of water, cedar and pinon needles on the red rocks. This created a nearly unbearable rush of hot vapor that left as quickly as it came, leaving the pleasant lingering odor of burned needles. Hoskie told me only needles from trees struck by lightning can be used. "It cures," he said. "Inhale it, drink it--it makes you well." A bowl was pressed to my lips and I sipped the resinous brew as Running Foot's chanting again filled the darkness. He called on Greater Powers to bring strength and luck to all residents of the Navajo ranch.

Running Foot doused another bowlful of brew on the hissing rocks and another burst of steam assaulted us. He began his third chant, calling for strength and courage to his hunters and warriors. Before men went hunting, they visited the sweat lodge to purge their bodies of human odors that might be picked up by a wary deer.

The old man gathered his strength for the last chant of this session. After a long silence an impassioned voice rose from his throat, blessing all who traveled from home that no harm would fall. The blanket, like an eyelid, flapped up and we crawled out, blinking and dripping, into the chill bright air.

Running Foot began rolling in a patch of sandy snow.. We all followed suit. The abrasive sand worked like coarse soap, scrubbing off dead

skin and grime. In this land of little rain there is no better way to become clean. I rubbed snow all over my body. It felt delicious. We burrowed back into the sweat lodge a while later for the second session.

The ritual was similar to the first--Running Foot recited four chants and poured the healing potion on the sputtering rocks. At the end of this session, however, he remained behind. "He is singing a prayer of thanks to the spirits of the sweat lodge," explained Hoskie.

This Blessing Way Song is also an apology for any errors in song, prayer or protocol made during the ceremony. Perhaps my presence was being atoned for. We had another roll and rubdown in the sandy snow, dressed and strolled as brothers back to the hogan.



Sioux Lodge

Sioux sweat lodge frame and sacrificial pole ca. 1900

A few months after my experience with the Navajo sweat lodge, I drove through the misty farmlands of northern California to the D-Q Native American and Chicano University, quite a contrast to the barren buttes of Navajo territory.

A newsletter had announced: "D-Q University will co-sponsor the Sacred Sun Dance Ceremony, one of the most sacred of all religious events to be held on the West Coast for the first time in the History of Man. Conducted by Crow Dog, Medicine Man of the Sioux, this year's Ceremony will be in the oldest ways--eight days of Offering, Fasting and Pipe Ceremonies ..."

I knew the sweat bath was an integral event in the Sun Dance Ceremony and doubted the Sioux permitted outsiders to participate. I expected only to be a spectator. A long-haired Indian stopped me at the gate to make sure I carried no cameras, firearms, drugs or alcohol. I signed in and he waved me through with a welcoming smile.

I found the Sun Dance grounds just as the rain gave way to a heavy mist veiling teepees in a grassy field. A large circle loomed in front of me, about 25 meters in diameter, created by a series of H-shaped supports. They were crowned by a thatched roof, two meters off the ground. It resembled the circular foyer of a theatre. A lone cottonwood tree stood in the center, planted especially for the Sun Dance Ceremony.

The sweat lodges were clustered together in the near background. Although I had arrived late on the seventh day, rain had delayed the Ceremony and the dancers had not yet left their teepees. That gave me time to talk with some non-dancers huddled around a pit fire outside the roped-off Ceremony area.

"When the dancing begins," a young man told me, "you'll file around the right side of the ceremonial grounds along with others who haven't gone through the purification ritual." His long hair held mist in a million droplets. "Those of us who have gone through the ritual will move to the left where the drummer and singers stand." I asked if he was a Sioux and he shook his head.

I knew from Black Elk's *The Sacred Pipe* that the dancers used the sweat lodges for Inipi (rites of purification) and didn't until now realize non-Sioux were allowed to participate.

"Observers are allowed to go through the purification sweat at night after the dancers have finished their sweats," my friend told me. "Next day you can be a spectator alongside the drummer and singers." A voice called that the dancers were ready and rhythmic pounding began on a buffalo hide drum.

I removed my shoes and joined the uninitiated. We filed in a circle along the north side of the perimeter. A buffalo skull lay near the cottonwood tree in the center of the ring. Dancers, blowing on eagle bone whistles, danced single file into the arena.

To those not familiar with Sioux culture, the Sun Dance may seem brutal. It was outlawed by the federal government in 1904 and only recently has its practice been permitted under special circumstances.

The controversial part of the ceremony is known as piercing. After an hour of dancing and singing around the cottonwood tree, a dancer lays down on his back. The medicine man cuts two slits in the skin of his chest above each nipple. He then pulls up the skin, opening the wounds wide enough to slip a peg through each pair of slits. He wraps a rawhide thong around the exposed ends of the pegs and ties on a single rope, much like the Y-shaped tow line of a water skier, the top of the Y tied to the tree. The dancer rises and resumes dancing and blowing on his whistle. He dances backwards until the rope is taut, his skin stretching against the tug of the rope.

Other dancers encourage him in a fury of dancing, whooping and whistling. Finally, by leaning back, dancing and screeching on his whistle, he rips the pegs from his flesh.

Soon another dancer takes his turn. The Sioux believe flesh represents ignorance, encapsulating the spirit. Breaking the skin is meant to release the individual spirit for submission to the Great Spirit, Wakan-Tanka. The shedding of blood symbolized the merging of the dancer's blood with tribesmen who died in battle, and the mother in childbirth. Through eight days of dancing, fasting and sweating, the dancers purify themselves for Wakan-Tanka.

I watched spellbound all afternoon as four dancers were pierced and released. At dusk, the dancers, wounded and exhausted, filed from the

circle. Since they were fasting no food awaited them, but the sweat lodges had been heated for their third and final purification bath of the day. We observers retreated to the campfire for a meal of venison, beans and fried bread.

A man named Charlie passed me a steaming cup of black coffee and told me we must prepare tobacco ties before entering the sweat lodge, one tie for each prayer we wished to give. He led me to a tent which served as a temporary medical shelter. Inside, a small group of people were busy working with patches of brightly colored cloth and piles of untreated tobacco. Charlie placed a pinch of tobacco in the middle of the square cloth and folded the corners until it looked like a small ghost. "Then take a piece of black thread," he told me, "and wrap it around the neck of the cloth three times, finishing up with a clove hitch. Space the prayer twists an inch apart--never string less than four and never an odd number."

As I took a chair and began preparing my tobacco ties, a young fellow proudly told me he'd been working all week on a string of 200 prayer twists. He was going to take on a Sioux name and become an eternal friend of the Sioux nations. His naming ceremony was scheduled for the last night of the Sun Dance. Soon after I finished my prayer twists, a voice announced the sweat lodges were free for anyone who wished to join the purification ceremony.

We walked past the sacred dancing grounds toward the ring of sweat lodges where a fire blazed in the center. By the time we arrived, the four non-Sioux sweat lodges were already full. Each held six or seven participants and one Sioux leader. (These lodges were much larger than the Navajo's.)

We stripped outside and entered through the west entrance, as was the custom. On a log between two lodges, I joined a group of men waiting their turn. The night's cold air bit sharply, making the prospect of a hot sweat all the more enticing. I could hear muffled prayers seeping through the heavy skin, canvas and cloth covering the sweat lodge. Finally, six of us were led to the east side of the circle.

Following instructions, we murmured a Sioux prayer which roughly translates, "To all my relations," as we filed into the sweat lodge. Moving east to west, past a depression in the center which held the hot rocks, our seating followed the path of the sun. Our Sioux leader sat down last on the east side near the door. I sat opposite him and tied my prayer twists to a willow bough above my head.

In the glow of the fire burning outside, the leader told us of the Sun Dance and the special meaning of the sweat lodge. "It is a very ancient and sacred part of Sioux life," he said. "The sweat you are now taking is in honor of the Sun Dancers who dance, fast and suffer for the good of us all. Your prayers tonight shall be for their strength and good fortune."

"One of the men you saw being pierced today," he continued, "was only fifteen years old. You saw how well he took the pain. He will grow up to be a great warrior. Women don't need the piercing ritual. Men understand what they are doing is comparable to what women endure in childbirth."

A fire watcher entered carrying a hot rock on a shovel. He laid it with others in the shallow depression. "The first rock is dedicated to Wakan-Tanka, who is the center of everything." The fire watcher brought in five more rocks, one by one. "One for each direction of the earth. All the rocks together represent everything in the universe. During the ceremony, the door will open and close four times to symbolize the letting of light during the four ages."

Our leader sang a long Sioux prayer which Black Elk translated in his book, *The Sacred Pipe*. He then splashed water on the glowing rocks six times--for Grandfather, Father, Grandmother, Mother, the Earth and one for the Sacred Pipe. Just when the hot steam became uncomfortable, he called outside for the flap to be opened and a blast of cold air refreshed us. The sacred pipe was filled and handed in and the flap was closed. The Sioux puffed on the pipe, gave a prayer to Wakan-Tanka and the Sun Dancers, and instructed us to follow his example as the pipe was passed from east to west.

When my turn came I praised the dancers, took a puff and wiped smoke over my body as instructed. "All my relations, all my relations." I passed on the pipe. When it had made the full circle and was back in the hands of the Sioux, he prayed for all of us, tossed more water on the rocks and the door flap was thrown open.

Normally, we would have gone through the sweat at least twice again, but the Sioux, a dancer who had led three other sweats that evening, preferred not to continue. "You have all been purified," he said. "Leave the sweat lodge from the east, head west, and as you exit say, 'All my relations.' You have smoked the sacred pipe and have taken the sacred sweat. Good luck to you!"

I hope you have enjoyed this issue of Dream Catcher.

Be safe and I'll see you next time, BlackBear.

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