

# Sacred Land Film Project

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## Dancing for Peace

by Christopher McLeod

**A**T DUSK along the edge of the massive reservoir that has flooded their ancestral homeland, eight Winnemem dancers appeared. Eagle, turkey and heron feathers adorned their headdresses and skirts, and bright orange flicker bands covered each man's forehead. One stepped forward and began spinning a wooden drill against a dry piece of wood. Smoke appeared, then sparks, and suddenly flames burst from a nest of grass. With the lighting of the sacred fire, the Winnemem War Dance at Shasta Dam was underway.

For four days and nights the men fasted and danced as the women sang, bringing back to life a ceremony last performed in 1887, when white settlers built a salmon hatchery on prized fishing grounds of the McCloud River band of the Wintu. Offering prayers to the fire, the dancers raised spears, bows and arrows, and fists in the direction of the enemy — a 602-foot tall, 15-million ton



Photos by Christopher McLeod

concrete monolith that the U.S. government wants to raise by between six and 200 feet to store more water. This would drown 20 more Winnemem sacred sites in the McCloud River valley south of Mt. Shasta, desecrate ceremonial areas and historic village sites, and require the reburial of more ancestors.

We were filming the dance at the request of Tribal Chief Caleen Sisk-Franco, who is determined to use the media to get the Winnemem message out and win a seat at the table in discussions about the dam. "We have no more to give," she said. "We can't tolerate another flooding. We need to let people know that we have been pushed too far, and they can either help us or they will be participating in killing us."

The men danced through the night. Stars glittered over the eerily lit dam and the fire illuminated the historic scene. I was stunned by the image in the video monitor of a dancer lifting bow and arrow and calling defiantly to the enemy. It was unlike any television I have ever seen.

Early the next morning, I approached Caleen to tell her that a reporter from the *New York Times* was waiting to interview her. She was sitting quietly with her eyes closed, singing. She scribbled some words on a pad. "A song's coming in," Caleen said. "Can you get me a tape recorder?" I found one and she sang the words into the recorder. She turned to the reporter and explained that the new song was a prayer to the birds, asking them to carry the dancers' prayers to the Creator. (He wrote about Caleen receiving the song in a major story in the following day's *New York Times*.)

(LEFT) SHASTA DAM; (ABOVE) WINNEMEM WINTU WAR DANCERS, FROM LEFT TO RIGHT, JAMES WARD, MARK FRANCO, DOUG SCHOLFIELD AND RICK WILSON.



As we continue to document struggles to protect sacred lands, I am struck by the fact that while native people pray to the mountain, the water, the birds and the spirits, they also pray *for* the mountain, the water, the birds, the salmon — *for the Earth*.

By the afternoon of the second day, the reporters and photographers were all gone. The mood around the dance calmed to a relaxed, timeless rhythm. The drum began to beat and another dance started up. I was standing by the edge of the reservoir looking at the dam and talking with one of the dancers who was taking a break. "If this doesn't work we'll have to do the Ghost Dance," he said. The mention of the late 19th century ceremony that swept through Indian country, raising hope of the disappearance of the white man and return of vanishing wildlife, sent a chill up my spine. I sensed movement to my right and turned to see a huge bird — white head, white tail — soaring by at eye level 30 feet away.

"Bald eagle!" I called out.

The majestic bird glided by, tilted its wings and looked straight toward the fire and the dancers. I saw its yellow eye flash in the sunlight.



Smithsonian Institution National Anthropological Archives

THE LAST WINNEMEM WINTU WAR DANCE WAS IN 1887.

I ran over to where the women were singing and whispered to Caleen that a bald eagle had just flown by. She smiled. After the dance she said, "That was the first time we sang the song that came in yesterday morning, the prayer to the birds."

The timing of the war dance was auspicious. Over the summer of 2004, the Winnemem grew increasingly con-

cerned as the government proposal to raise Shasta Dam, which had languished for ten years, suddenly gathered momentum. In July, Bureau of Reclamation officials held a public hearing in Redding to announce that an Environmental Impact Study would begin next spring. Caleen felt the threat of a second flooding of her home



## Project Highlights in 2004

**W**e gathered 40 activists and artists at Asilomar Conference Grounds in Monterey, California, for a strategy conference on "Traditional Knowledge, Environmental Justice and Sacred Lands." Chris Peters produced a six-part *Native Pulse* radio series featuring interviews with conference attendees Winona LaDuke, Vernon Masayesva, Henrietta Mann, Charmaine White Face, Sonny Weahkee, and Julia Butterfly Hill.

Running with a great idea from Asilomar, Native American artist Lillian Pitt is developing an art exhibit on the theme of sacred places and the sacredness of water. The show will open at the 4th World Water Forum in Mexico City in March, 2006.

The Sacred Land Film Project is curating the exhibit. The 12 artists who have agreed to contribute will each create three works. Participating artists include: Arthur Amiotte, Rick Bartow, Harry Fonseca, Waileuha Gray, Frank LaPena, Dan Namingha, Darcy Nicholas, Lillian Pitt, Al Quoyawayma, Tom Rudd, and Gail Tremblay.

For the last two years we have partnered with EPA Region 8 in Denver to develop, design and pilot a government training program on "Environmental Justice and Cultural Resources." We created educational materials, including training kits, instructor's guides, a Powerpoint presentation, and video clips from *In the Light of*

*Reverence*. A team of trainers and Native American tribal workgroup members convened in Washington, D.C., in September to participate in a one-day pilot program, and we are refining the training program for use throughout the federal government.

We launched a new initiative to highlight corporate responsibility as a key component for conflict transformation on sacred lands. Consultant Lyuba Zarsky completed a 42-page draft of a "White Paper" titled: *Is Nothing Sacred? Corporate Responsibility for the Protection of Native American Sacred Sites and Landscapes*. The report includes site profiles and analysis of the best and worst corporate practices at sacred

places. After review and revision the paper will be posted on our Web site.

We expanded the Sacred Land Defense Team and sent e-mail alerts on threats to Bear Butte (SD), Snoqualmie Falls (WA), Mauna Kea (HI), Coteau (ND), McCloud River (CA) and Black Mesa (AZ).

Writer Amberly Polidor, editor Amy Corbin, researcher Mimi Schiffman, and Web master Kevin Rardin added 15 Web site reports on threatened sacred places around the world. Please visit [http://www.sacredland.org/sacred\\_lands.html](http://www.sacredland.org/sacred_lands.html).

territory was so serious that she prayed about what to do. She received guidance that the proper response was *Hu'p Chonas* — a war dance — to bring the people together to defend their water, land and culture through prayer, dance and song.

As the Winnemem began to prepare for the ceremony, word came from Washington, D.C., that retiring Senator Ben Nighthorse Campbell (R, CO) was preparing to introduce a technical amendment that would restore the Winnemem's federal recognition (which was mysteriously discontinued by the BIA in the 1980s for reasons that have never been explained). Campbell needed assurance that California Senator Dianne Feinstein would support his amendment. Feinstein is one of the key players in California water politics, and with a chronic water crisis worsening and state population growing, she has embraced the raising of Shasta Dam as a pet project. Going ahead with the war dance suddenly represented a serious political gamble.

Many Winnemem also expressed concerns about their safety. Exposed in the darkness, would they be targets of racial hatred, religious intolerance or violence? Supporters in D.C. called and asked Caleen to cancel or delay the ceremony.

"What is the point of attaining federal recognition if we lose sacred sites?" responded Caleen. "Those places are the basis of our identity. We need them for our culture to live on. We can't just move and replace sites we have used for centuries. The rock where we initiate young girls at puberty will be lost forever if they raise the dam. I will not trade recognition for the destruction of sacred places."

The dance went on.

On the third day of the ceremony, word came from Washington that Senator Campbell had decided to withdraw the technical amendment on Winnemem recognition because of Senator Feinstein's opposition. On the fourth day, the news arrived that after being stalled for ten years the Senate had authorized \$395 million for California water projects, including the feasibility study on the raising of Shasta Dam.

Apparently, the powers-that-be were sending a familiar message to the restless natives.

Gazing out day after day at Shasta Dam holding back that huge quantity of water, with speedboats roaring across

the vast liquid playground, it struck me what an apt metaphor the concrete monument is for America — big and destructive, damming the life spirit, no voice for native people or the Earth, and when things start deteriorating (water shortages, reservoir silting up, salmon going extinct) the solution is MORE and BIGGER: let's add on to the dam and make it higher!

Last spring we convened a conference of forty sacred land activists and artists on the shores of Monterey Bay in California. Hopi leader Vernon Masayesva, who is still battling against Peabody Coal Company's groundwater extraction on Black Mesa, observed, "Every eight seconds a child dies from a disease related to polluted water. Companies are going all over the world, buying water, profiting from water, making water less and less available. Nations are going to start fighting over water. It's not going to be over oil. You don't drink oil. I think the big war is going to be over water."

In an interview during the war dance, Caleen said: "We are a people who sing to water. We go to the headwaters on Mt. Shasta and lay down prayers for the spring because we know that is the life source, and that makes the water happy. We are talking about something very precious, and we don't want to see boat oil in it. The bottom line is that if water gets sick so does everything. To dam it and pollute it and then provide it to people to drink — it doesn't make sense to us."

On the final night of the dance, Winnemem Headman Mark Franco donned a bearskin and became the bear. Roaring and growling by the fire, the powerful spirit being challenged the dancers to join their strength to defend the people and the land. It was a potent demonstration of how native people have come to embody our collective responsibility for the environment, and how care-

taking is both a physical and spiritual endeavor.

We shot 15 hours of amazing footage during the war dance and edited a seven-minute film, which was shown at the American Indian Film Festival in San Francisco and before a screening of *In the Light of Reverence* in Marin County, where Julia Butterfly Hill appeared in support of the Winnemem struggle against the raising of the dam. The first screening of the war dance film was on The Mall in Washington, D.C., during the opening of the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian in late September.

After that first screening in Washington, we accompanied Caleen and Mark to a reception for Senator Ben Nighthorse Campbell at the new

Christopher McLeod



WINNEMEM AND THE SENATOR (FROM LEFT): GARY MULCAHY, CALEEN SISK-FRANCO, SENATOR BEN NIGHTHORSE CAMPBELL, MARK FRANCO

museum. We arrived early and found the Senator standing alone in the large, round rotunda on the first floor. The Winnemem warriors had ten minutes alone with the Senator during which he offered to introduce a stand-alone bill to restore federal recognition and affirm their sovereignty. Two weeks later he made good on his promise. It's no guarantee of success, especially without the support of California's Senators or Congressmen, but the Winnemem's compelling story has been entered into the *Congressional Register* and S 2879 will hopefully move forward next year — even as the fight against the raising of Shasta Dam goes on.

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