Bringing Back Iitskinaiksi at Siksika

HERMAN YELLOW OLD WOMAN

Oki. Nitsitaniko Naatootisiini.

I’ll start with the time before repatriation happened. In 1979, we began having a camp that we called a Spiritual Retreat. It was somewhat like an Aako’ka’tssin, but it only lasted for three days—Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. During those days, our Elders who had transferred from the Iitskinaiksi and the Maoto’kiiksi would have a day to talk about their societies. At that time, I think there were only about ten of them. The camp was at Blackfoot Crossing.

At that time, the Kiitokiiksi [Prairie Chicken] and Kana’tsomitaiksi [Brave Dog] were the only societies that were still very active. The Kano’tsisissin [All Smoke Ceremony] was also still going strong. The other societies—the Iitskinaiksi and the Maoto’kiiksi—were dying off. We realized that it was getting to a point where it was going to be very difficult to continue our traditional
ways. Some of the Old Folks were still around—we still had Beatrice Poor Eagle, who cut the tongue for the Kano’tsisissin. But then, by about 1994 or 1993, the few Elders that we had all seemed to be passing away.

We thought, “Gee, we have to do something.” We asked ourselves, “How are we going to get it back? How are we going to have the songs and ceremonies transferred to us?” Those of us in the Kiitokiiksi decided that it was time for us to transfer, to give our bundles to a younger group, and that we had to move on to another society if we wanted to preserve our societies. I was one of the younger members—the older ones were in their fifties. To be honest, there wasn’t much going on, other than the Kano’tsisissin and the Spiritual Retreat.

A couple of weeks before the retreat, I said to Chris McHugh, “I’m going to go get some pegs for my tipi. I need to cut new pegs for my tipi.” He said, “I’ll come with you. When are you going to do it?” I told him, “Well, maybe I’ll go this evening.” He said, “Okay, I’ll be ready. Bring your pipe. We’ll smoke a pipe out there.”

I didn’t know why he wanted me to bring my pipe. I was told to respect my pipe and not to fool around with it. But I got ready, gathered my pipe, and I picked up Chris. We went to the Sand Hills and starting cutting the pegs. He sat a little distance from me at first. Then he came over and said, “Herman, did you bring your pipe?” I replied, “Yeah.” He said, “Could you fill it fast?” I said, “Yeah, yeah.” So I filled my pipe and I gave it to him. I didn’t know what he was going to do with it. Maybe he was going to pray. Then he turned back around and pointed to me, and he said, “You know, all these years you people have been talking about bringing back Iitskinaiksi? Well, Granny has told me to take the Iitskinaiksi Leader’s Bundle. She said that I have to have a partner, and I’ve been thinking about you. You filled your pipe for yourself and I’m asking you right now. This is going to change things if you take this pipe.” I thought to myself, “Let me think about this.” And then I remembered those Old Folks who talked to me about transfers and if the pipe comes to you, you can’t refuse. So I took it, and that’s how it all started. That was 1994, May of 1994.

STARTING AGAIN AFTER THIRTY YEARS

We needed to talk about it with the Elders who were left. They were blessing the ground of the area where we were going to have the retreat, so we sent a pipe

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to them. They smoked it. I remember it was a cold morning, with a wind. It was June, the rainy season. They were all bundled up. We made a fire out there and were all sitting around. When they were done, we said to them, “We have something to ask you. We would like to get things going again. And this is our idea. We are going to transfer out of the Kiitokiiksi—give it to the younger ones. But we want to carry on. We want to bring back the Iitskinaiksi.” At the time when we said that, nobody had any interest in the Maoto’kiiksi.

They listened to us and they were very quiet. Finally, Mrs. McHugh—Chris’s grandmother—spoke up and said, “When you talk about these things, you have to pray. You have to pray with your whole heart. So let us make a smudge.” We made a smudge and she prayed, and when she was done, she said, “Anytime you want to talk about this, this is what you have to do. Don’t just talk about it. That’s the proper way. You guys are talking about taking the Iitskinaiksi. There are only about three bundles left. The rest are in the museum. Furthermore, you cannot do anything without having Maoto’kiiksi. Maoto’kiiksi are the ones who start the camp, and there are only three of us left here who are Maoto’kiiksi. We’re all hitting ninety.” Then Old Lady Mrs. Three Suns said, “I never thought we’d live to the day we’d be talking about this. To me it is very exciting. It is a blessing.”

They are all gone now. Mrs. McHugh was there, and Mrs. Three Suns, and Maggie (figs. 23–25). And she was in her nineties, too. They were all sitting there and said, “Okay, let’s not talk about it right now. We’re here for the purpose of blessing the ground where we’re going to camp. Let’s finish this and when you guys move into camp, invite us and use this pipe again.” So we started moving into camp. It wasn’t a very big camp. The first night, we set up camp. The second night, we got food together. Then we invited them. At the start, it was just the Old Ladies who were supporting us. The good thing about that was that one of them, Mrs. Poor Eagle, was an O’kaan woman. The other ladies were ex-Iitskinaiksi, present Iitskinaiksi, present Maoto’kiiksi, or ex-Maoto’kiiksi. So we had support from all those Old Ladies.

They came in, sat down, and said, “You have a problem. Two of the main people that could have helped you out just passed away.” At that time, Jim Black Face Chief was in his nineties. He had always prayed for this to happen and could have helped us. We lost him three weeks before the retreat. The other one was Steve Many Fires. He knew every song, he had transferred
Figure 23. Clarence and Victoria McHugh, Siksika Elders, 1958. Courtesy of the Glenbow Archives (NA 5571-60).
Figure 24. Emily Three Suns (left) and Heavy Shield (right), of the Siksika Nation, at the Calgary Stampede. Courtesy of Glenbow Archives (NB-40-611).
Figure 25. Maggie Black Kettle (Siksika) in traditional dress, 1968. Courtesy of the Glenbow Archives (NA 5571-7).
everything—Medicine Pipe, Beaver Bundles—everything that we needed to learn. He was the guy. He had also passed away recently. They went on to say, “You’re not stuck. We have Mark Wolf Leg. We just have to convince him. This is what you guys have to do to get started. First of all, you have to negotiate for those bundles to come home.”

There was a lot of resistance in the community to our efforts to bring back Iitskinaiksi. After that first retreat, when we negotiated and talked with the Elders, they supported us. But that did not lead to community support. The community started getting involved, saying, “You know, it’s not a good idea to bring this back. Maybe you guys should leave it alone.” To understand why people would say that, we have to look at how the bundles left us. In the 1960s, when people sold the bundles, there were a lot of bad things happening. But we told people, “We’re not giving anything up. We’re bringing it back. We’re going to bring back our way of life, the prayer. Our way was very strong then. That’s what we’re going after.”

I’ve got nothing against Christianity, but it was very strong in our community, and that is where the resistance was coming from. As well, some of the families who were involved in selling these bundles to museums and collectors had experienced tough times as a result of their actions. Thirty-two years had passed between the time when the bundles left and when we first talked about reviving things. But they remembered what had happened when the bundles had left, and they resisted their return.

When we asked the Old Ladies for more advice, they told us, “Once you think about it or talk about it, then you can’t turn back. You have to do it. You might hurt yourself if you’re just going to talk about it and never do it.”

We started to organize a meeting with other Elders. Henry Sun Walk, one of the Elders at the time, wasn’t very strong in his legs, and he was using a cane to get around. But he sat in on our meeting and advised us: “You have to go south. You have to go get our brothers to the south. They’re still going down there. You guys go down there and they’ll help us.” So that’s what we did—we got help from Kainai.

Sometime after our first meeting, I was all by myself at my mom’s house. I was living with her at the time. Suddenly, there was a knock at the door. I jumped up and went to the door. It was my uncle, Adam Delaney, from Kainai. Uncle Adam very seldom came around. Oh, I was happy! I thought to myself,
“Something’s right! I was going to drive down there to meet with him and here he is, standing at the door.”

I immediately got him some tea to drink, and he sat down. He’s one of those people who, if you don’t offer him something to drink, if you don’t show interest, he will get up and walk out. I told him, “It’s very amazing that you came here today.” Then I explained to him what was going on. He said, “Let’s pray.” After we prayed, he said, “I’m going to tell you what to do. You put up a sweat for me. Call all of the men who are involved in what you are doing. In that sweat, we’ll talk about what needs to take place.” That was the beginning.

There was myself, Chris McHugh, Raymond Crow Chief, Leo Pretty Young Man, Jr., the late Henry Three Suns, Norbert Bear Chief, Irvine Scalplock, Richard Right Hand, Randall Axe, Fred Breaker, Clement Leather, and there were some who came in at the start but dropped out. There were twelve of us. We had the sweat down at Raymond’s house in Cluny. Adam said to us, “Okay, it might take two years. It might take five years. This is the beginning. You guys need to go negotiate for those bundles to be returned.”

This would have been in 1995. We planned the day when we would go see the people at the Glenbow. They had most of our Iitskinaiksi bundles. I couldn’t go because I was teaching Blackfoot at Crowfoot School and I didn’t have a replacement or anyone to help. If I didn’t go to work, there was no Blackfoot class. But I did go when they went to Edmonton. At the time, I thought it would take a year to get our bundles. Then, all of a sudden, they said, “We’re going to go get them.” It was about three months after that that we started taking them home. We kept them on the third floor of the Old Sun College (fig. 26). This was a mistake because Henry Sun Walk (fig. 27) was the only Elder who was able to help us, and Henry wasn’t able to make it up the stairs. He tried once, and after that he said, “Don’t come to get me. It’s too much to climb those stairs.” But there was no place else we could have brought them, unless it was into a home, and that was against our protocols. They were hung all around as though it was in a tipi.

Most of the male Elders who were around were the Iitskinaiksi who had sold these bundles. At first they tried to help, but then they backed off. But we still had a lot of Iitskinaiksi ladies. I think we had about eight Iitskinaiksi ladies. Today, we still have two out of that group, and they are in their nineties. We have Pius Three Suns left—the only one of the men left. But he is up in his
nineties. If you talk to him like this, he won’t hear you. He has special earphones and a device. His hearing is really poor.

Adam said, “You have to ask these questions. You need to know who the fathers of the bundles are, who the grandfathers of the bundles are.” We didn’t know these things. It turned out that only Henry Sun Walk was qualified to be a grandfather. Adam explained to us that because the others were the previous owners, they were our bundle fathers. Not only were they the fathers, but some of them were still Iitskinaiksi. So that was difficult. Our cultural protocols concerning bundles tell us that those who are in the position of being our “fathers” aren’t supposed to talk to us about Iitskinaiksi things. But by then, it was too late—we had already met with them.
It gets pretty complicated. If you had a bundle and you sold it without transferring the rights, then you were still a itskinaaksi. When that bundle gets repatriated to someone else, the new keeper would want the rights transferred to him—rights that someone else already had—so we had to work out who still had the rights to which bundle. The previous keeper should transfer the rights to the new keeper of the repatriated bundle. But sometimes they refused to become involved. Thirty-two years is a long time. They had forgotten how to do things and were afraid of making mistakes. So they just said, “You guys hired Kainai. You let the Kainai finish this off.”

Adam would come here and run meetings and pipe ceremonies. At that time, I still thought it would be a year or two before we transferred into the
society. I didn’t realize that the next spring we would be going ahead. We had sweats; we had meetings. It was so amazing and so interesting. I learned so much just in that time.

Adam would come and say, “There’s only so much I can tell you guys. You’re not Iitskinaiksi yet. I’m just preparing you to become Iitskinaiksi. You’re not going to sing. You’re not going to smoke a pipe the way Iitskinaiksi smoke a pipe, because you’re not Iitskinaiksi yet. The majority of you have transferred rights for Kiitokiiki and Kana’tsomitaiksi. That’s why I’m telling you certain things.”

But he would get stuck with something, and then he would say, “I’ve got to go back home. I have to think about this. Next Sunday, you guys have another meeting and I’ll come back and I’ll tell you how we’re going to do this. In the meantime, you guys negotiate for the bundles that are here on the reserve.”

That was the most difficult thing we tried to do. Today, there are still bundles in the homes, but people don’t want to transfer them. One of the reasons is that the people who have them don’t want Kainai to handle their bundles. They said, “We’ll wait until you guys are on your own.” So there are three bundles still out there. One of them is the bundle that shoots the gun. And the one called Niitopii, the bundle that’s on its own. Then there is another one called the Lighter’s Bundle. Those three were never sold.

But we managed to get everything with the other ones. The Glenbow gave them to us.

The biggest obstacle that I experienced was that people were scared. The community was frightened. Many people had lost their belief in our traditional ways and followed various Christian denominations. They were afraid of Iitskinaiksi. It took about four years before people started coming back to the Aako’ka’tssin. We would move into camp, and only the society members would be there. We would “dance out,” and there would be nobody sitting, waiting for us. Those who did come parked far away, watching from a distance. Finally, finally we got people to start coming. We are not back to the times where the whole community comes to the Aako’ka’tssin. When Maoto’kiiki had their last dance, there were maybe three hundred people here watching. When the Kiitokiiki danced, it was double. When we were the Iitskinaiksi, when we came out, there were probably a thousand people watching. In 2009, we had, I think, thirty-three tipis in the circle. We had a lot of people.
COMING HOME FROM MEDICINE HAT

There was a lot of power in repatriation, especially when it came to Maoto’kiiksi. I’m going to tell you about this one experience I had in Medicine Hat.

A Cree or Métis lady had invited me to Indian Awareness Week in Medicine Hat to do a tipi demonstration. I went down and they put me up in the Travelodge motel, about a block away from the museum. I wanted to go to that museum, but by the time I was finished my tipi demonstration, I’d be tired and just go for supper. By the time I got to the museum, it would be closed. The day I was going to go home—I had my tipi poles and everything all loaded up—I said to myself, “I’m going to go in there before I head home.” I told the people at the museum about repatriation, what was going on back home, and our efforts to bring back the Aako’ka’atsins. The lady at the museum said, “You know, we have something in the back. I want you to take a look at it. I want you to tell me what it is. If it is one of the bundles that you guys are repatriating back into your community, you take it.”

I was kind of excited, and, at the same time, I was shocked. So I walked back there and they had this big cupboard that they opened up. There were two Scabby Bull headdresses of the Maoto’kiiksi. They said, “We’ve asked where they come from. They come from Siksika.” I told them that these were powerful and that I was going to make a smudge. They said, “Oh yeah. We know. We know what they are. We know they’re powerful.” So I made a smudge and I talked to the bundles and I prayed. I told the bundles, “Don’t be surprised, I’ll be back in a few days. But in the meantime, you do your work and I’ll do my work.” As I was walking out, I was praying for the people there. I got home and I unloaded my stuff. I was working for Old Sun Community College at that time, and when I told Irvine Scalplock, curator at the Siksika museum, about the bundles, he wrote a letter requesting that the bundles be returned to Siksika. Two days later, I got a phone call, and Irvine said, “Are you ready?” I said, “Why?” Irvine replied, “We’re going to get those headdresses.”

I sent word for Mrs. McHugh to come with us. She was in poor health and very weak, but she came with her grandson, Chris. We met them at Medicine Hat and drove to the museum. She asked them, “Where’s that stuff?” She was a real bold old lady. “Where’s that stuff?”
When they opened the storage cupboards, Mrs. McHugh started praying. Then she said, “What are you guys just standing there for? Wrap them up!” Chris looked at them: “They’re Maoto’kiiksi. We can’t handle them.” “Oh no!” she said. “You guys are going for Iitskinaiksi. You guys are the boss. You wrap them up. Don’t be scared. Wrap them up!”

We had some cloth, and we wrapped up both of them. She said, “I’m going to say a prayer. As soon I’m done, you guys start walking—straight for the door.” I took one headdress and Chris took the other one, and we started walking and she started praying.

That was my first experience of taking a bundle, of actually carrying a bundle, and it was like somebody was pushing me from behind, pushing me to go faster. The bundle itself was a headdress, but it felt like somebody was pushing me to the door. When we got outside to put it in the vehicle, there was nobody pushing me any longer.

We put the headdresses in the back of Irvine’s van and turned to the Old Lady and said, “What are we going to do with these headdresses when we get them home?” She said, “Take them back up to the museum. When the time comes, when the Maoto’kiiksi are going to get started, then they will come and get them and bring it to the retreat.”

So we took them home and then went for bundles that were at the Glenbow. We took everything we thought we needed. But that was an experience.

COMING HOME FROM THE ROYAL ALBERTA MUSEUM

It was a little more difficult working with Edmonton. We discovered that, in the 1960s, a collector had been working for both the Glenbow and the provincial museum. Some bundles were split up, with parts ending up in both places. The provincial museum would have half of a bundle and the Glenbow would have the other half. For example, some of the Iitskinaiksi bundles that we got from the Glenbow didn’t have garters. When we went to Edmonton, we’d say, “Hey, that bundle didn’t have garters. And they belonged to so and so and these are his garters. Why would he take out the garters and sell them to Edmonton?” Sometimes, the paints were separated. Sometimes, the main bundle went to the Glenbow, but the secondary parts were in Edmonton. The keeper would not
have done that, because he was only paid one price. The collector made double money on these because both the Glenbow and Edmonton would have paid him. We didn’t actually repatriate full bundles from Edmonton until the Kit Fox Bundle came back, until the Medicine Pipes came back. They were all complete. The rest weren’t. They had only the second part of what the Glenbow had.

We were negotiating with the museum director in Edmonton to have the Kit Fox Bundle returned. It had belonged to Nat Owl Child, and Richard Right Hand was going to take it. The Iitskinaiksi had a meeting about a month before we were going to transfer, and the museum director showed up. He came down to Siksika with the Kit Fox Bundle. Adam Delaney was running that meeting.

Adam said, “You tell that guy to stay out there. Don’t let him come in until we’re ready.”

Soon everybody got there and the room was full. Adam said, “I’m going to tell you guys something. I’m the only one who has the right to talk to that museum director. You guys are not Iitskinaiksi because you haven’t gone through the transfers. You’re just sitting there. You’re preparing to be Iitskinaiksi. When he comes in here, I don’t want any of you to talk. I’m going to do all the talking. When I’m done with him, I’m going to tell him to leave.”

When the director came in, oh my God, he had an earful.

When Adam was done talking, the director said, “Adam, can I say something?” Adam looked at him and said, “I told you I’m done with you. Now get up and get out of here!” To us, it was harsh. We were trying to negotiate to get the bundles back, and here was our grandfather blasting this guy, blaming him for everything.

The museum director went out, didn’t bring the bundle in, and he went back up to Edmonton. He took the bundle with him. Later, he sent word that he was not going to discuss the bundle until we went to see him in Edmonton. He made it very clear that he didn’t want Adam anywhere near him. About two weeks later, I went to the provincial museum with Irvine, Raymond, and Chris. The director said to us, “Oh, you guys trapped me.” We told him, “No, we didn’t. You ran into trouble. And we’re not Iitskinaiksi. We can’t say anything because we’re not Iitskinaiksi yet. And we were told we can’t say anything. We’re here to negotiate.”

He replied, “I’ll negotiate with you guys. But I don’t want to have anything to do with Adam.” So we negotiated with him on our own and got the bundles back.
Before Adam was involved, Mrs. McHugh and—I can’t remember who the other Old Lady was—painted Chris and me because we had the Leader’s Bundle. They opened it up with Chris and me sitting right there and said, “If you guys are going into this, you need to have the rights to this bundle.” There were some things that happened before Adam came that, to his way of thinking, were not appropriate. He believed that we were not supposed to be able to touch the bundles until we were transferred the rights to become Iitskinaiksi. But, for the Old Ladies, everything was day-to-day at their age. They didn’t want to miss any chances with it. These people thought, “If you’re not an actual Iitskinaiksi, we’re going to paint you to be like a Iitskinaiksi.” The Kainai didn’t think that way. They didn’t believe in that. Here at Siksika, we had shortcuts. That’s basically what they did with us that day. When we went to Edmonton and negotiated the Kit Fox Bundle, we used that transfer to handle it.

The bundles have power and can really play tricks on you. One time, we found a bundle, and the museum staff gave us some unbleached cotton to wrap it in. Then they said, “Well, you can’t take it home today. You’ll have to come back and get it.” We were kind of upset and we left. Later, the museum staff members were looking for it—I don’t know what they were going to do with it—and it was missing! The museum director immediately assumed we had taken the bundle with us without them knowing: “Oh! They stole it. They took the Kit Fox Bundle home.”

When we phoned back to say we were coming to pick it up, they told us that they could not find it and that the museum director was accusing us of stealing it. He had not looked for it himself. When we arrived at the museum and went to the storage area, we found the bundle just where we had left it. We took the bundle home that day.

**Coming Home to the First Aako’ka’tssin**

Adam said, “Let the Old Folks have their regular retreat. When they are done, we will take over and there will be an Aako’ka’tssin.” So that’s what happened. The peace, the calmness in camp was amazing. It was the last day of retreat; tomorrow would be the Aako’ka’tssin.
When we moved into camp, Adam said, “Okay. We’ll use your tipi—you’re going to have to move out. But we need another tipi, too.” The late Florence Scout, from Kainai, was with us too, looking after the Maoto’kiiksi. She pointed out that they also needed a tipi in which to keep their bundles. Adam said to us, “Well, you guys have been handling these bundles. Go get them!” There was Adam and his wife and Charlene and Roger Prairie Chicken from Kainai. Although Charlene and Roger were visiting some friends, Adam did not waste time waiting for people to show up late. He told us to go and get the bundles.

Two vehicles went to get them. One vehicle was full of Iitskinaiksi bundles. One vehicle was full of Maoto’kiiksi bundles. They brought them all down and backed up the one vehicle to the front of my tipi. By that time, Roger and Charlene had arrived and started carrying the bundles into the tipi.

When the bundles came in, Adam said, “Once we get started, I don’t want anybody to come in. You have to have somebody sitting outside your tipi. There might be somebody show up and just come in.” So we guarded those two tipis and they went to work. Florence was on the other side of the camp circle in Raymond’s tipi. Then the four—actually five, because there was Franklin Sheldon, Roger and Charlene’s partner—who were in my tipi went to work. It was almost dark by the time they were done.

They had to open every bundle and find everything. Then they had to put them back the way they were. Finally, Adam said, “Everything is ready for tomorrow.” That night, we went into the Iitskinaiksi lodge. It was the first time we put up our lodge. We went in, and he started showing us what to do. It was so much work, but the adrenaline was flowing. We were excited. We didn’t get tired. But Adam was getting tired. He would come to my tipi, lie down, and go to sleep. We were all following Adam’s instructions. We would be sitting in the centre lodge until three or four o’clock in the morning. Then Adam would say, “Okay you guys are done. Go get some rest.” We’d all go to our camps and get some sleep. First thing in the morning he’d be going around camp calling, “Get up. The day is short. You guys got things to do. Get up.” He’d be going around camp getting us up.

The transfer started the next day at about seven o’clock in the morning. By noon, he was rushing us: “The day’s going to be short. Hurry up and get things going.” We were done by evening time. I went into my tipi to sleep. It was still only six o’clock in the evening, but I was tired. My cousin used to camp beside
us. In the evening, she would cook us a meal, bring it into my camp, and we would eat.

The next day, we were going to dance. Once again, Adam showed each of us, individually, how to put our bundles together, how to put the headdresses on and everything. He said, "Now we're going to leave. We're going to leave." And he called my name: "Come stand by the door." There were only nine bundles at the first transfer, so we just had a single tipi, not the two tipis together that we usually have. He said, "Here, Naatootisiini, come here." So I went to the door. He said, "We're going to lead." There was Roger's father, Alan Prairie Chicken, and also Winston Day Chief, Joe Spotted Bull, and Bruce Wolf Child. Adam told me, "When you come out of the tipi, you will call them." And he showed me where they were parked. "You face directly towards where they are sitting. You're going to call their name. After you've called them in, then you call me and I'll come in here and make sure everything is ready. Then I'll go back out."

When everybody had their headdresses and everything on, I came out. It was so amazing. There are two valleys that merge at Blackfoot Crossing. The camp wasn't big. I went out and I called each of the four drummers. And it echoed in each of the four directions! If one was parked to the north, I looked out there and called the person by name, inviting him to help us through the day by drumming for us. You could just hear that echo. And then I'd turn the other way, and the same thing. It would echo back. There was power. When you are out there just talking, there is no echo. But that time, we had an echo.

The Elders that I called started coming. Adam just stood there and looked to the left and all the way around. He had a lump in his throat. He cried. He put his head down. Today, when I talk about it, I get goose bumps.

Adam said, "Well, my work is done. It was a tough work. Right now is the beginning of something new. We never had this in the history of our people. This is all brand new. Now it's up to you guys to bring it back." It was very powerful. Then we started, and he went back out of our lodge. He said, "I'm going to be out here. I'm going to watch you guys from out here. Now it's their job—the drummers. But I'm going to be out here."

They started singing and we started dancing inside. Then it was time to come out. The only people who were sitting out there were the Old Ladies whom we had approached and asked for their approval the year before. You should have seen the tears in their eyes when we came out. They didn't expect this to...
happen. Mrs. Poor Eagle stood up when we came by. I will always remember
that. After we passed, then she sat down. We could hear her in the distance,
praying, saying how glad she was that this was coming back.

When the drumming stopped, it was just calm. Mrs. Poor Eagle was tell-
ing the people sitting there, “I never dreamed to have this, to be here at this
day. I thought it was never going to come back. And here it is. I’m seeing the
Iitskinaiksi again.”

Then we went around camp and got on the horses. There was a camp of
Full Gospels a little ways away from us. They had a good crowd and very loud
music. When we stopped on the south side of our camp circle, the music from
the Bible camp stopped. It had been so loud and now it stopped. We looked over,
and everyone at the camp was standing outside of their big tent. We got off the
horses, danced, and remounted. By the time we made it back to the east side of
the circle, the people from the church meeting were all parked there. When we
went back into the centre of the camp, they all walked in and watched us dance.
It was amazing.

When we first came out for the Iitskinaiksi dance, I thought there would
be a lot of people sitting there in the camp circle waiting for us. But when we
came out, we were the only ones there. That kind of bothered me. It didn’t
bother me to the point where I got emotional. But Adam did. He sat there and
said, “You know, don’t worry about what’s happening here. It is kind of pitiful.
But watch, in a few years time, things will turn around. It’s not this age group
that’s going to support you. The younger people are the ones who are going to
watch. They are the ones that are going to want to take over.”

TELLING THE ALBERTA MUSEUMS ASSOCIATION ABOUT
COMING HOME

I was invited by the Alberta Museums Association to speak about repatriation
in Lethbridge at one of their annual conferences. This was shortly after our first
Aako’ka’tssin. I did not know how to talk about it, so as I was travelling, I started
praying, asking the Creator to help me to put it together.

When I started talking, I went back to the time when the missionaries first
came. That was when our life started changing. Eventually, they started taking
our kids away—our ancestors’ kids—and putting them in residential prisons. It was very hard for our people at that time. It tore apart a lot of families. I went from that time to the days when the bundles began to leave us, when people started abandoning our way of life. Once that started happening, people began abandoning their children, and the children started becoming wards of child welfare. The children started being adopted off reserve, being taken away. I talked about the effect that it had: the alcoholism and the abuse—physically, mentally, sexually. Any kind of abuse that you could think of—it happened here.

I was taken away from that as a young child. My dad and mother lived at the 1D Ranch on the Blood Reserve with my uncles, who ran the ranch. When I was there, I saw how strong our culture could be. I started going to the Kainai Aako’ka’tssin in 1969 or 1970. Coming back home to Siksika was like going into a war zone. Some days it was calm, and some days . . . It was lonely when I was a kid. Our family was broken up. I was hit with the abuse—alcoholism, abandonment, everything. We were poor. Everybody outside of the boundaries of the reserve had the luxury of turning on a switch to light up their homes, go to the sink and turn a tap for water, go to the bathroom, watch television, or open the cupboard and there’s something to eat. This was the 1970s, you know. At that time, you would think that almost everybody in Alberta would have had these things.

Those are some of the things I talked about at the conference in Lethbridge. I talked about how all this affected the people of my generation. I talked about how it was going to be my generation that was going to change that. We were going to bring back our traditions and let our people have pride in their identity again. We were going to put the negative things that affected our generation behind us and just focus on bringing back our way of life.

I had mixed emotions about why I was trying to revive these traditions. At one stage, I was doing all this for the Elders of the day. Then I was doing it for the children. And I was doing it for my generation. As time went on, it changed, and I was doing it for the generation behind me and the generation behind them. And I see the good. If you look across the camp circle today to Kent Ayoungman, he has a son who is very knowledgeable about this way. My son is with me at the camp. They had not been born when all this was starting up. Whoever thought that I would have children who are going to carry on with this? Now, my son knows things about our way of life. If he visits another house whose family does not
know anything about it, he will tell them. I have heard how, when he goes to visit his relatives, he will tell them, “You can’t do this, you can’t say this. This is how it is.” He is teaching them. Those are some of the things that I experienced as a child growing up. I would go to the Aako’ka’tssin and be involved with Kainai and then come home to a community of my generation that did not see the Aako’ka’tssin anymore. The generation behind us was gone. So that is where the gap was. Now we were filling in the gap for our generation.

I talked about that to the museum conference, about bringing our children back into our homes and restoring them along with our families, our Elders, everything.

But we had not done any of this in 1994. I think that even the Spiritual Retreat would have been gone without the revival of the Iitskinaiksi. Mark Wolf Leg was given the Kano’tsisissin in the 1970s and was carrying that on. But it seemed to be dying out because the Old Men who were running the Kano’tsisissin with him were passing away. That ceremony would have eventually disappeared. When Mark passed away in 2007, there was no transfer of the Siksika Kano’tsisissin ceremony. We still have a Kano’tsisissin ceremony, but it isn’t the Siksika style. Those kinds of things take a generation to revive.

**COMING HOME TO BUILD THE FUTURE AT SIKSIKA**

Today, these sacred societies have come back, and it makes me feel good. I feel a restored peace. I feel a restored power, especially here in the Bow Valley. There’s so much power in this valley. As you walk along, you encounter an old camp, an old camp fire, an old sun lodge, an old Maoto’kiiksi lodge, or an old sweat lodge. Every direction you go in this valley, there is something that is hundreds, maybe thousands, of years old. Sometimes, when we come to put up camp, we might camp right on an old campsite without even knowing it.

The Elders that I talked to when I was growing up always told me to listen, never to argue or to complain, but to respect our traditional ways. There was a man who used to visit our reserve showing movies from the National Film Board. One time, he was going to show the film the Glenbow made, Okan, at my cousins’ house. There was an old couple sitting there. The man had some transferred rights. When we finished watching the movie and started talking, I asked
the Old Man, “What is the possibility of bringing that back?” His wife said, “Oh, there’s no possibility.” He just sat there and said nothing for a while. Then he said, “Yeah. There’s a possibility. But that possibility is not with us. Because we are the ones that threw it away, there’s no possibility of us bringing it back. It’s going to have to be the young people of this nation that’s going to bring it up. If you guys want it back, it’s your own responsibility.”

I was only about eleven years old when I asked him that question. He didn’t live to see this. He passed away maybe four years before we started this in 1994. But imagine if we had started ten years before!

I hope that in the future, our people will understand what it took for this to all come together. I saw the effects of it leaving us, and now I see the effects of it coming back. I see how it is restoring a lot of our culture. If you go into the schools and ask the students, “What do you think about this?” they will tell you. Not all of them know anything about it. But the majority of them have been taught. They respect it and they like it.

The return of these bundles has done miracles for the community. Our children were not learning about the respect, the traditional respect. Now they’re learning. They’re learning in school. When I was in school, the teachers would say, “Our O’kaan is on the video. We’re going to watch the video.” That’s all we knew about O’kaan. Now they say, “Go to the O’kaan, the Aako’ka’tssin. Take your children.”

Look around this Aako’ka’tssin camp today. There are hardly any adults here, but there are a lot of children here. They are learning first-hand about what the ceremonies are all about. Yesterday, when these Old Ladies, the Maoto’kiiksi, were putting up their lodge, the children were just watching. They know that out of respect they can’t go over there. They were all playing around the camp.

They are having a sweat over there, across the camp. The children are playing over here, but they won’t go over there. They are taught how to respect our traditions.

These are some of the things that our children are starting to know. When we started seventeen years ago, we said we would focus on our children, on the unborn. They are the ones who are going to take over. Our Elders at that time said, “We’re just going to sit back. We’re going to watch. And if you need any help, we’re on the way.” Today, most of them are gone. They have just about all passed away. We have maybe four of them left.
When you come here and watch these Iitskinaiksi dance, you’ll see that about 80 percent of the people watching are under thirty. That’s what makes me feel good.

Around the time we were starting, we had Elders who had songs—every song that needed to be learned. They kept telling us, “You guys need to learn these songs. You come, even come with a recorder, and I’ll sing them to you. I’ll transfer them to you. We’ll sit down. We’ll sing. But we’ll record everything.” Chris and I must have recorded all those Elders. Now, they are all gone, and we are the ones holding these songs. Today, when the Iitskinaiksi are going to dance, there are only three of us who can sing those songs. There’s Chris, myself, and Clement Leather.

When I look back to that day, I remember Adam saying, “I feel for you guys. It’s going to be a tough fight. It’s going to be a tough journey.” When he talked, then that emotion hit me. I had a lump in my throat.

That was a very powerful time.