

# Sacred Land Film Project

P.O. Box C-151, La Honda, CA 94020 \ Tel 650-747-0685 \ Fax 650-747-0750 \ slfp@sacredland.org \ www.sacredland.org

## Returning Home

by Christopher McLeod

On a blistering summer day in 1994, I drove 86 year-old Winnemem Wintu leader Florence Jones into the Forest Service campground on the McCloud River, south of Mt. Shasta.

"My father planted that fig tree over there," she said excitedly, "and those apple trees." She was visibly moved by the memories.

I knew the campground sat on top of *Kaibai*, an ancestral Winnemem village site, but I didn't realize that Florence had grown up here and become intimate with

the river and everything around it. This was her home.

She pointed to a large gray rock by the river and said, "That's Children's Rock, a safe place for little ones to swim. That boulder on the other side of the river is Puberty Rock, a sacred site. We grind medicine and herbs there when we initiate the girls."

*"Walk up the river every day and listen to the birds, the otters, and the rocks. Listen to what they're saying. Talk to them. Hear what is being said. After you swim across that river you will have new responsibilities."*

After Florence passed on in 2003, her great niece Caleen Sisk-Franco became the leader of the Winnemem. This past July, Caleen gathered the tribe at the ancestral village site for a coming-of-age ceremony

for her 14 year-old daughter, Waimem. Puberty Rock was still a few feet under the dammed-up waters of Shasta Lake, which were unusually high due to heavy winter rains. Nonetheless, Caleen decided *Balas Chonas*, the traditional rite of passage ceremony, could not be delayed. The summer flowers needed for the ritual, the full moon, and a fast-

growing girl would not wait.

The Winnemem are still not federally recognized and they continue to fight against government plans to raise the height of Shasta Dam, which would flood more sacred sites and permanently submerge Puberty Rock.

The campground concessionaire charged the Winnemem's supporters more than \$1,000 to camp in the thousand year-old village site and the Forest Service refused to close the area so that the Winnemem could conduct their ceremony in privacy.

The Winnemem reminded the Forest Service that gold prospectors had massacred most of the villagers in 1854 and that Florence Jones' father, a young boy at the time, escaped by swimming away. They argued that the government should close the area temporarily during their ceremony, particularly to boat traffic, as people would be in the water and Waimen would be swimming across the river on the fourth day.

Despite these obstacles, Caleen gathered a hundred of her people, called in the ancestor spirits, mourned the absence of the salmon, and gave Winnemem names to those who needed them. It was a historic return to home ground, the first time the ceremony had been performed openly for 100 years. Beneath a bright full moon, dancers circled the fire



Photos by Christopher McLeod

AT THE CONCLUSION OF THE PUBERTY CEREMONY, 14 YEAR-OLD WAIMEM SISK-FRANCO LEADS A PROCESSION AROUND THE FIRE. FLORENCE JONES' DAUGHTER, MARJORY CHARLES, AND WINNEMEM LEADER CALEEN SISK-FRANCO ARE AT RIGHT.

as songs were sung late into the night. The dancers were inspired. The joy was palpable. The Winnemem had come home.

Before she went across the river to spend three days by herself, Waimem's father Mark Franco, the Winnemem headman, told his daughter, "Walk up the river every day and listen to the birds, the otters, and the rocks. Listen to what they're saying. Talk to them. Hear what is being said. After you swim across that river you will have new responsibilities."

Time slowed as each 110-degree day passed. Songs were practiced and meals shared. Everyone cooled off in the river. With each passing night the dancers gained power and camaraderie spread through the camp.

Cooperative Forest Service rangers asked boaters to stay away, and most did, though an occasional boat floated by, heavy with curious onlookers. Then, on the third evening of the ceremony, a motorboat came upriver, thumping with Rolling Stones music, a drunken boatman waving his beer can, another calling out war whoops and yelling "Nice teepee!" as they passed Waimem's solitary bark house. A woman lifted her shirt and flashed her bare breasts repeatedly as our camera rolled.

The Winnemem, the rangers, and our film crew watched the display. My 8 year-old daughter was appalled at the disrespect shown to her friends. People were angry, but they heeded their leader's insistence that they not respond.

As the sun set on the eve of the ceremony's concluding day, an unsettled feeling lingered in camp.

≈ ≈ ≈ ≈

There remains little doubt that a combination of determined resistance and education is helping to protect sacred places.

A *Los Angeles Times* reporter called me late one November afternoon asking for a comment. The CEO of PG&E, California's largest utility, had that day publicly apologized for desecrating the Fort Mohave Indian's Topock Maze, which the tribe has long regarded as the pathway souls

travel to the afterworld. PG&E built a \$15 million water treatment plant on the site without consulting the tribe. The utility had dumped hexavalent chromium there for 18 years, and a treatment plant was needed to prevent a toxic plume from moving toward the Colorado River. Threatened by a lawsuit, PG&E agreed to move the building, return the land to the tribe, and publicly apologize. The next morning, the *Times* ran the story on its front page under the headline: "Historic Apology Over Sacred Site."

That same week, the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals issued a decision protecting California's Medicine Lake. My mind flashed back to the raucous demonstration I filmed at Calpine headquarters in January, when hundreds of Indians and their supporters marched, chanted and prayed that Calpine would stop drilling for geothermal power at the lake and respect a place of mythic importance, purification rites and vision quests.



WILLIAM "JIMBO" SIMMONS AT CALPINE HEADQUARTERS IN SAN JOSE, CALIFORNIA, JANUARY 27, 2006.

The court ruled that government studies did not take a "hard look" at cultural and environmental impacts, as required by law, and the court voided the leases. This was a major victory.

The 9th Circuit may yet make another historic decision this year in a case involving the San Francisco Peaks. Above Flagstaff, Arizona, a controversial ski area wants to use treated sewage water to

make snow on the sacred peaks, revered by more than 13 native tribes and home to the Hopi *kachina* spirits. The tribes sued and had their day in court in September. I was in the courtroom to hear an exchange between the ski area attorney and one of the three judges.

The attorney for the Snowbowl argued, "The ski area takes just one percent of the national forest, and the snow-making will be on just one quarter of one percent of that area."

The judge countered, "Do you accept the idea that the mountain is viewed as a whole and the Indians would see the entire mountain as desecrated?"

We are making progress.

≈ ≈ ≈ ≈

We are also making connections with other indigenous communities in distant places around the world.

In November, we had three visitors from the Altai Republic of Russia, a mountainous region where Mongolia, China and Kazakhstan converge. We are hoping to film there, so the delegation came to check us out. We met Igor Sailankin, Director of Nature Park Belukha — a snow leopard sanctuary with sacred 14,783 ft. Mt. Belukha at the center — and Ermen Surkashev, Director of Nature Park Argut, and Chagat Almashev, who runs the Foundation for Sustainable Development of Altai. Like the Winnemem, the people of the Altai resisted a century of government repression by tyrants like Joseph Stalin, when rituals and language were forbidden and people sent to prison camps. They are now reviving the cultural traditions that survived:

throat singing, pilgrimages, reverence for sacred totemic species like the Altai argali mountain sheep and the endangered snow leopard.

"We maintain connection to the land through petroglyphs, standing stones, *kurgans*, throat singing, totem plants and animals like snow leopard and wolf. It's something people live with every day," explained Igor.



CHRISTOPHER "TOBY" McLEOD WITH ALTAI VISITORS (FROM LEFT) ERMEN SURKASHEV, CHAGAT ALMASHEV AND IGOR SAILANKIN.

About Mt. Belukha, he said, "The people mention it in their prayers. It's sacred to everyone in Altai. We call it *Üch Sümer*, which means 'three peaks.' It's paradise, a promised land."

The Altaians are concerned about Russian archaeologists who take human remains from the sacred burial grounds on the Ukok Plateau, Russian Orthodox Christian pilgrims who plant crosses on the slopes of Mt. Belukha, climbers who leave trash on the mountain, and trophy hunters who shoot snow leopards from helicopters. Meanwhile, the Russian giant Gazprom plans to build a natural gas pipeline across the Ukok Plateau to China.

We hope to film there next year.

With generous research and development funding from The Christensen Fund, Grousbeck Family Fund, Newman's Own, Compton Foundation, and several individual donors, our new film project is taking off. We will continue our research through the winter and spring, and start filming in Australia in July. Two years of filming will be followed by one year of editing, with release of our new film series, *Losing Sacred Ground*, in 2010. Our total budget is \$3 million and we are fundraising now, with about one third raised or committed.

Also this fall, after three years of work, we completed an important new report on *Corporate Responsibility for the Protection of Native American Sacred Sites*. Calvert sponsored the release of the report at the annual "SRI (Socially Responsible Investing) in the Rockies" conference in Colorado Springs. Project Advisor Chris Peters presented the report and we screened a new 5-minute film, narrated

by Peter Coyote. Native activists, shareholders and socially responsible investors are urging companies to develop policies on indigenous rights, including prohibitions on damaging sacred sites.



As the sun set on the third day of the Puberty Ceremony on the McCloud River, Caleen gathered a half dozen people around the fire. We were each to receive a name. When my turn came,

she said, "You are *Pihotlelnas*, the one who always wants to be first." Everyone laughed.

"Some people might think that's a bad thing," said Caleen, "but it's good, like making your documentaries as powerful as they can be, and getting out there and

educating people with the right message."

On the final day of the Puberty Ceremony, the Shasta County Sheriff closed the river to boat traffic. Waimem and her three attendants swam across the green water of the McCloud River and emerged triumphant to whoops, cheers and tears. As the climactic deer dance began — with a dozen antlered dancers prancing to avoid a hunter's arrows — a deer appeared on the opposite bank of the river, laid down in the grass, and seemed to watch the ceremony.

As the dancing ended and Waimem presented gifts to her tribe, a bald eagle soared down the river and landed on the top branch of a pine tree across the river — new generations coming home.

