

MARY LOUISE DEFENDER WILSON AND KEITH BEAR

North Dakota is a land of beautifully expansive skies and vast landscapes that allow one to see seemingly forever. It's a land where the horizon is blurred by distant heat-shimmies that create a watery mirage in the hot summer sun or by the white-outs of a winter blizzard. In such instances the point of distinction between the heavens and the earth disappears and they meld into one - timeless, endless, and enduring. And so it should come as no surprise that the worldview of the Dakotah, Mandan, and Hidatsa who live here is reflective of this environment.

Whether it's a Hidatsa emergence story that speaks of the people coming from the stars down to earth to settle at an area called Painted Woods or the Dakotah who tell of entering the world from a mystical opening beneath the ground at Lesser Bear's Lodge, their stories seek to reveal, explain, and give guidance with regard to the ageless themes of humanity. Themes like love, anger, heroism, and the search for meaning have always been with us and always will. So while times change, the issues of humanity remain the same blurring the distinction between past, present, and future. Thus, these stories endure and are just as relevant today as generations past.

Their origins are sometimes historical, ceremonial, or spiritual - given to people by supernatural entities. They are passed down in the hopes of illuminating and elevating the human condition of each generation. These stories often feature mythical heroes, supernatural entities, animals, birds, plants, the land, and the stars for they are seen as "wiser than us in many ways," and their characteristics are exemplified as examples for people to live by. For instance, humorous "trickster" stories featuring Coyote, a character who exaggerates base human characteristics, illustrate the folly of traits like pride, gluttony, and greed and promote the traits of humility, moderation, generosity, and self-sacrifice.

Thus, storytellers are viewed as valuable repositories of ancient and spiritual knowledge that is to be used to guide the people's actions. Two of North Dakota's most highly regarded and gifted storytellers are Mary Louise Defender Wilson and Keith Bear.

Mary Louise Defender Wilson (Wagmuhawin - "Gourd Woman") is a Dakotah/Hidatsa elder enrolled with the Standing Rock Indian Reservation. She lived most of her life in the rural town of Shields, North Dakota with a population of nine people and was born to George and Margaret Defender. Delivered by her midwife grandmother, Mary Louise grew up in a small house with her mother, three older brothers, her grandfather Tall Man See the Bear, and her great-aunt Mrs. Runs in the Center.

Mary Louise grew up and learned from a family of storytellers speaking the Dakotah and Hidatsa language. Mary Louise expands, "We lived by gardening and as sheep herders. We would follow along with the Old Ones and the dogs who tended the sheep.... and Grandfather would tell us about the rock formations, hills, streams, and buttes we came across." The first story Mary Louise recalls hearing was at three years old. By the time she was in the fifth grade, she herself started telling stories to her classmates. She believes that it is important to share stories with Indian and non-Indian alike, because they teach us "how we are to behave as civilized people."

Mary Louise has received numerous awards including The National Endowment for the Arts National Heritage Fellowship and Best Spoken Word awards from the Native American Music Awards for each of her three CDs of storytelling. She has presented throughout the United States and Canada, in Iceland, and will be touring in Germany in the fall of 2006.

Keith Bear (O'Mashi! Ryu Ta - "Northern Lights") is a Mandan/Hidatsa flute player and storyteller enrolled with the Fort Berthold Indian Reservation. He lives in the small community of Drags Wolf Village, North Dakota. Keith spent much of his youth in foster homes and as a young adult was involved with the American Indian Movement (AIM). Quickly becoming disillusioned with that organization, he moved from place to place working oil rigs and boxing. Then, keeping a promise to his dying mother, Keith returned home and reconnected with his culture through the "sacred branch of the Tree of Life," the flute, that told him, "You are a child and must learn to walk a new way."

Through extended family members, friends, and ceremonies Keith learned traditional songs, beadwork, porcupine quillwork, flute music, and traditional stories; crediting people like Naomi Black Hawk, spiritual leaders and healers Ralph and Sammy Little Owl, Tony Mandan, and Lydia Sage-Chase for teaching him to "walk a new way." Today he even performs the sacred Buffalo Dance, a ceremony only honored tribal members may perform.

Keith has become an acclaimed flute player and storyteller presenting in schools, concerts, and festivals throughout the United States, Canada, and in Switzerland, Ireland, Wales, Germany, and Austria. His flute music is featured in two CDs, with the second receiving a Best Traditional Album award from the Native American Music Association. He is currently working on an enhanced CD titled *Morning Star Whispered*, featuring flute music and traditional stories, to be released in the fall of 2006.

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North Dakota Council on the Arts

For information regarding Mary Louise Defender Wilson's and Keith Bear's CDs visit:
http://www.state.nd.us/arts/publications_recordings/recordings/recordings.htm and www.makoche.com or call the North Dakota Council on the Arts at #701-328-7590 or Makoche at #1-800-NDSound.

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