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Alcohol Problems in Native America: A New and Provocative History

Don Coyhis and William L. White

Could a book about history serve as a catalyst to change the future? Could a book about history enhance the practice of addiction counseling? Those are the dual hopes of the authors regarding their just-published *Alcohol Problems in Native America: The Untold Story of Resistance and Recovery—The Truth about the Lie* (258 pages, \$18.95). This new book marks the latest in a series of recent resources (including *The Red Road to Wellbriety*) that will be a great help to addiction counselors working with Native American clients.

Alcohol-related problems constitute significant problems in many Indian communities, but the roots of those problems and the potential solutions to those problems have been misconstrued throughout American history. The centerpiece of that misconstruction has been a cluster of five “firewater myths”:

Myth 1: American Indians have an inborn, insatiable appetite for alcohol

Myth 2: American Indians are hypersensitive to alcohol (cannot “hold their liquor”) and are inordinately vulnerable to addiction to alcohol.

Myth 3: American Indians are inordinately prone to violence when intoxicated.

Myth 4: These very traits produced immediate, devastating effects when alcohol was introduced to Native tribes via European contact.

Myth 5: The solutions to alcohol problems in Native communities lie in resources outside these communities (Leland, 1976; Thatcher, 2004).

These firewater myths have been so widely inculcated that they constitute core beliefs with the dominant culture, within many helping professionals and even within many Indian communities. These myths persist in spite of having been investigated and debunked by addiction scientists and modern historians.

For the past five years, the authors have researched the history of alcohol problems and their resolution in Indian communities. Our research has unraveled a remarkable history of resistance to alcohol problems and a long, vibrant and virtually unknown history of recovery among Native peoples. There are twelve truths at the center of this story.

1. *Native Americans possessed an exceptional knowledge of botanical psychopharmacology prior to European contact. They lived in harmony with the power of these plant-based substances (including alcohol in some tribes) by respecting the spirits and rules of the plants from which they were derived. These substances include potent forms of tobacco, alcohol (in some tribes in the Southwest and Southeast), stimulants, sedatives, analgesics and hallucinogens (including datura, peyote, psilocybin, mandrake and fly-agaric).*

2. *The initial response of Native tribes to alcohol availability following European contact was not one of drunken mayhem and widespread alcoholism. The early responses to alcohol varied within and between tribes and varied over the course of early contact, but one thing is clear: the development of alcohol problems in Indian communities emerged slowly and out of the changing relationships between Indians and Europeans, not as a function of any innate vulnerability to alcoholism.*

3. *Alcohol problems and alcoholism rose as Native tribes came under physical and cultural assault and when drinking alcohol shifted from a ritual of intercultural contact to a tool of economic, political and sexual exploitation. Maria Brave Heart (2003) has eloquently framed the rise of alcohol problems among Native tribes as an outcome of historical trauma experienced by a whole people.*

4. *Early “firewater myths” portraying Native Americans as genetically inferior (inherently vulnerable to alcoholism) provided ideological support for the decimation and colonization of Native tribes and continue to serve that function today. The persistence and pervasiveness of the firewater myths are striking in light of the absence of definitive evidence that Native Peoples physically respond to alcohol differently than other races or possess a unique biological vulnerability to alcoholism (Schafer, 1981; Westermeyer and Baker, 1986; May, 1994; Long, et al, 2002; Thatcher, 2004).*

5. *The legacies of the “firewater myths” include generations of stigma (the “drunken Indian” stereotype), racial shame, and a fundamental misconstruction of the sources of, and solutions to, alcohol problems in Native communities. There is no greater obstacle to the resolution of alcohol problems in Native communities than the misidentification of the roots of those problems.*

6. *Native leaders actively resisted the infusion of alcohol into tribal life and continue to resist such infusion today. As alcohol problems rose in Native communities, tribal leaders actively resisted the whiskey trade or tried to manage alcohol through the guidelines and rituals that had long been used to manage the potentially harmful effects of other psychoactive drugs. Native medicines and healing rituals were also used in the treatment of alcohol addiction.*

7. *Early indigenous responses to alcohol problems included the development of sobriety-based religious/cultural revitalization and healing movements that constitute the first recovery mutual aid societies in the world--a century before the Washingtonian revival of the 1840s and two centuries before the founding of Alcoholics Anonymous. These movements included the Delaware Prophet Movements, the Handsome Lake Movement (the Longhouse Religion), the Shawnee and Kickapoo Prophet Movements, the Indian Temperance Movement, and the Indian Shaker Church and the Native American Church.*

8. *Recovery traditions in Native communities continue today through abstinence-based religions, the “Indianization” of Alcoholics Anonymous and Al-Anon (Womak, 1996), new recovery-based cultural revitalization movements (e.g., the Wellbriety Movement), and the rise of culturally-informed alcoholism treatment. To tell the story of alcohol and other drug problems in Indian communities without telling the story of resistance and recovery is to lie by omission and further wound these communities.*

9. *The most effective and enduring solutions to Native alcohol problems have*

emerged and continue to emerge from within the very heart of tribal cultures. In the Native worldview, there is no separation between the individual, the family and the tribe. To wound one is to wound all; to heal one is to heal all. The revitalization of Native cultures is at the core of efforts to enhance resilience to and recovery from alcohol and other drug problems.

10. *The history of resistance and recovery within Native American tribes is a testimony to cultural forces of prevention and healing that continue to constitute powerful, but underutilized, antidotes to alcohol problems.* This calls for new partnerships between treatment professionals, treatment organizations and tribal elders and healers.

11. *A period of great healing, recovery, renewal and resilience has begun within Native communities.* This process is illustrated by the rise and evolution of the modern Wellbriety Movement.

12. *Recovery from alcohol problems and alcoholism is a living reality in Native American communities and has been for more than 250 years.* *Alcohol Problems in Native America* is more than anything else a celebration of the vibrant recovery that is spreading through Indian communities all over North America. We invite you to share in this celebration. We invite you to explore what are simultaneously new and old ways of preventing and treating alcohol problems in Indian communities.

Copies of *Alcohol Problems in Native America* (and *The Red Road to Wellbriety*) can be obtained by contacting White Bison at www.whitebison.org (719-548-1000 or 1-877-871-1495). White Bison is an American Indian non-profit organization based in Colorado Springs, Colorado. Its mission is to assist in bringing 100 Native American communities into healing by 2010. All proceeds from the sale of this book support White Bison and the Native Wellbriety Movement.

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About the Authors: Don Coyhis (don@whitebison.org) is the President and co-founder of White Bison, Inc., Colorado Springs, CO, and a member of the Mohican Nation from the Stockbridge-Munsee Reservation in Wisconsin. William White (bwhite@chestnut.org) is a Senior Research Consultant at Chestnut Health Systems, Bloomington, IL, and author of *Slaying the Dragon: The History of Addiction Treatment and Recovery in America*.

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