

# PEACEWORK

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## Transformation in Barre, Mass.

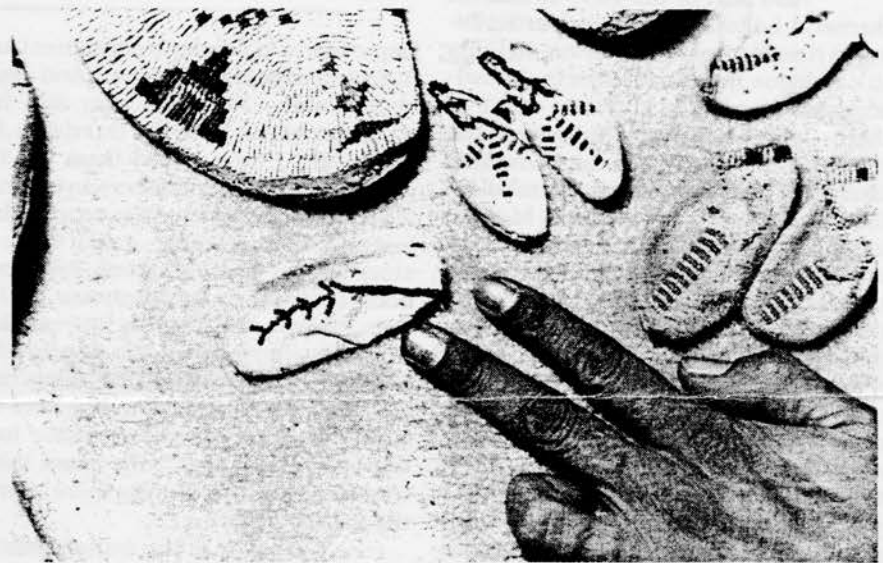
Native rights activist **Louise Dunlap** is a frequent *Peacework* contributor.

A five-inch article in the Feb. 15 *Boston Globe* ("Barre library to give back artifacts of Sioux victims") barely hints at what might be an intercultural story of deep change, a story that might help us all shake free of Columbus' legacy. Someone should write the full story: I know only a small part of it.

Sometime last fall I was astounded to read about Barre, Massachusetts on the front page of my weekly newspaper from South Dakota, *Indian Country Today*. The Wounded Knee Survivors Association had voted to repatriate a large collection of clothing and personal objects torn from the bodies of massacre victims, that had ended up in a private museum in the Barre library. The story quoted Survivors Association members I'd met at Wounded Knee in 1990, who were sickened and outraged, expecting a difficult battle.

I was appalled and also startled by the synchronicity. I had just been in the lovely, quintessentially New England vicinity of Barre showing slides about Wounded Knee with my photographer friend Skip Schiel. The quiet prosperity of the area and the whiteness of the buildings had struck me, as always, with the nagging thought that wealth in one place is generally linked with suffering in another. I copied the article and passed the word to a few others.

The word kept passing, and soon the few we'd told were contacting others who'd learned from others. By January, when Lakota representatives came from Pine Ridge (100 years to the day after Barre resident Frank Root turned over



Children's moccasins from the Barre library collection. Photo: Skip Schiel

his collection to the museum), local papers, NPR, the *Globe*, *Peacework*, and Channel 5 were all following the story.

Skip's careful phone contacts with the library staff had brought an invitation to show our slides in Barre, as well as an opportunity (carefully checked out with our friends in the Survivors Association) to photograph the collection. So he and I were there the day the Library Association met to decide on its next step in returning the objects to the Lakotas. During the talking circle with which we ended our presentation that evening it was clear from the 50 or so community people who were there (including some Library Association members and activists—Indian and non-Indian) that minds were open and it was or.ly the specifics of repatriation that

needed to be worked out.

If I were writing the full story of the Lakotas and Barre, I would want to know more about the people in this talking circle. I would want to know about Sarah Small. What was in her heart when she stood in the museum last fall with tears in her quiet eyes looking at the spirit paintings on the ghost shirt and told her friend John Bombard, "They should not be here." (And John, who got in touch with Professor Goss at Worcester State, who then contacted Mass Indian Commissioner, John Peters, and the Lakotas.) I would want to know about John Cirelli, president of the Library Association and principal of the local school ("a place where truth must be told," as one mother in the talking circle put it). How did he deal

with the pile of angry letters he must have received when his address was printed in *Indian Country Today*? And what happened in his heart as he responded to citizens, the press, and solemn Lakota from the far-away plains?

And I would want to learn more about Audrey Stevens, long-time curator of the collection, whose life had been deeply touched by the beauty and artistry of the objects even before she learned of their emotional and spiritual meaning for Lakotas. Audrey, a warm, articulate woman whose eyes sparkled with tears during the talking circle, though she did not speak. What was Audrey thinking these past months as she fielded antagonistic phone calls; read eyewitness testimony from Wounded Knee; met witty, generous, emotive Lakota people for the first time; searched her soul about the objects she had guarded for so long?

Also part of the story is Marvin Burnette, Lakota performance artist living in New Hampshire. Marvin, helping to catalogue the Barre objects, knowledgeable about the intricate craft of them—which decorative tufts were the old horsehair and which, more modern fibers—and how to recognize symbols of the four, or the six, directions. Marvin, touching the personal and the ceremonial objects reverently, delicately, with hands that know the making and use of them. Offering prayers to open and close the painful photo sessions, hanging small sage and cedar bundles with red tobacco ties on the display case holding pipes carved from the red stone said to have come from the blood of the people. (The word "Lakota" means holding the peace pipe.) Marvin who helped in the recent repatriation of Sitting Bull's necklace from another small New England museum. Marvin who first told us of the possibility of an NEA grant that would pay Lakota artists to reproduce the objects for display in Barre while the originals return to the people, a solution that would leave "all sides happy," and bring jobs to Lakotas in one of the two poorest counties in the US.

And of course I would write about people on the Pine Ridge. Especially those who made the journey to New England last month to experience the relics and begin to talk with the New Englanders. For instance Alex White Plume, whom we knew as an organizer of the BigFoot Memorial Ride and who is now the Ogalala Lakota tribe's director of parks and recreation. (The two Lakota tribes who lost people at Wounded Knee are now working with the US Parks



Marvin Burnette holds a headband at the Barre library. Photo: Skip Schiel

Department to develop a permanent and fitting memorial on the site.) And especially Celane Not Help Him and her daughter Maria from the Survivors Association. I have heard them tell the painful story of the massacre as Celane's father, Dewey Beard—who escaped but lost an extended family—told it to her. A story full of homely detail—of people bone-cold in their light footwear, of children, of awls and hunting knives taken from the women when the cavalry "disarmed" them. A story that takes on a choking immediacy when one sees the actual worn moccasins, the little toys, the beaded awl and knife cases taken from the people as they lay there later on the snowy ground.

I am part of the transformation at Barre, too. I had no idea it could

happen. The idea of Lakota objects in Massachusetts filled me with a paralyzing anger, reinforcing stereotypes of rigid, privileged New Englanders. But the spirit of change moved many people, as the story unfolded, and leaves a whole community of New Englanders feeling the joy that comes from compassionate understanding of difference and from deep transformations in ourselves and institutions. As Audrey told me just now when I called to check the facts, "We've got to stop the killing, and maybe this is the beginning." Such stories are all too rare.

*(The Wounded Knee slide show remains available for school, church, and community groups by contacting Skip Schiel at 354-0257.)*

## Review

### **Ancient Voices, Current Affairs: The Legend of the Rainbow Warriors**

by Steven McFadden

1992; 149 pp.; \$9.95

Bear & Co. Publishing, Santa Fe, NM 87504

In this powerful book, Steven McFadden joins environmentalists and indigenous people in calling us to become Rainbow Warriors to save the earth and ourselves. It's about making a difference in our lifetime as well as for the traditional seven generations to come. "The Legend of the Rainbow Warriors is, to use a modern term, a holistic myth, wherein we all have both the opportunity and the responsibility to become spiritually awakened heroes," writes McFadden, urging that we "create a spiritually informed culture that uses scientific technology to maintain freedom and enhance the balance of life." McFadden describes the Rainbow Vision from the perspective of the Cree, Lakota, Toltec, Crow, Aztec, Iroquois, Mayan, Hopi, Australian Aboriginal, Wampanoag, Seneca, and Tibetan people as well as Greenpeace! His work will be an inspiration to potential new Rainbow Warriors.

—Cynthia Knuth