

Remembering 'Willie Boy'

BY CHARLES HUDSON
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Williamson Bearstail was always well dressed. Even in his adult years, as he combed the streets of Northeast Portland looking for cans and bottles to redeem, I'd see him in a buttondown shirt and nicely fitted jacket.

I knew Williamson for over 40 years before I got word of his death in a Montana nursing home last week. I was a timid, skinny, half-Indian, half-white kid on the Fort Berthold Indian reservation in 1972 when Williamson and I found ourselves in gym shorts and t-shirts on the brown hills south of Parshall, N.D., (population 800). I was an 8th grader running for our seven-man high school cross-country team. Williamson and I were the only Native Americans among a small handful of sons of Norwegian farm kids.

Williamson was four years older, but unlike the other upperclassmen, he made time for me, and in his own subtle way, looked out for me, letting the others know I could not be picked on due to my age or heritage. A subtle segregation permeated my little reservation town, split down the middle between third generation Scandinavian homesteaders and the Indigenous Hidatsa people. Suffice to say Williamson belonged to no clique. During our lonely, cold practices on the hills south of town, Williamson ran alone. He ran hard. He ran with nobody cheering for him.

Native youth in Parshall would congregate each night in the front room of Bob's Steak House. Bob's had a jukebox, and in it a 45 of the song "Little Willy" by the rock band Sweet.

*Cos little Willy, Willy won't go home
But you can't push Willy round
Willy won't go, try tellin' everybody but, oh no
Little Willy, Willy won't go home*

Without his approval, our cluster of Indian kids made it Williamson's theme song. It went well with Williamson's nickname, 'Willie Boy' which was on his silks he wore into the amateur boxing ring. Williamson "Willie Boy" Bearstail still holds

the record for delivering the fastest knockout in North Dakota boxing history.

The first time Williamson and I lost track of each other was 1975. The song was prophetic; Williamson had left and would never go home again. I was not to see him again until 1999.

Just as he had on the prairie race courses, Williamson beat me to Oregon. He spent the '80s and '90s on the Portland streets after serving time in the Eastern Oregon Correctional Institution in Pendleton for assaulting a police officer. I was surprised when I saw him, the strong, compact frame, and the unmistakable Hidatsa features that even years of hard living couldn't tamp down.

Our relationship had changed. It is difficult to describe and I'm not proud of the circumstances. Williamson and I were, after all, both members of the same clan, the Prairie Chicken Clan, the most nuclear of tribal associations. I lived comfortably and prospered in Portland's well-heeled Irvington neighborhood. Irvington was also Williamson's urban turf where he gleaned cans and bottles from recycling bins. Occasionally I saw him with other Natives, usually a Plains Indian. We Plains Indians are nomadic but we tend to find each other no matter how far away from home.

I avoided direct contact with Williamson, I'm ashamed to say. I was afraid of what I might get myself into if I let him too close to my life. In any case, I don't think I had his back in the way he had mine 40 years ago. So, instead, I communicated with him through surrogates. Friends and neighbors who would slip him \$20 or relay information like the time I had to let him know his older sister Marliss had passed away. He replied, I was told, "That's too bad. I should probably go home."

That was the last surrogate contact we had. I heard through channels back home that he stalled in Montana attempting to get back to our Rez. He died in a Lewistown, Mont. nursing home on Jan. 14 at the age of 57. In his obituary, his sister Beverly wrote, "The life Williamson chose was a tough one."

Transitions

by J. McCurdy

She spoke
softly, soothingly
to the frightened child
I'd allowed myself to become
Of the places
We "get to" go
Before
We begin again
Places of wave and wind
Of sea and sand
I asked her through my tears
"Why"
She said because
There freedom wraps her wings
'Round my back
Inches up my spine
To let my spirit sing

Haiku

by Ian Civil

Above the tree line
Mt. Hood appears to hover
Suspended in air

Untitled I

by William Holmes

awareness for knives
break bread with confidence, men
eat fast, die hungry

 **Follow Street Roots on Facebook**

and Twitter! 

 **Welcome**

... to the health care you know and trust.

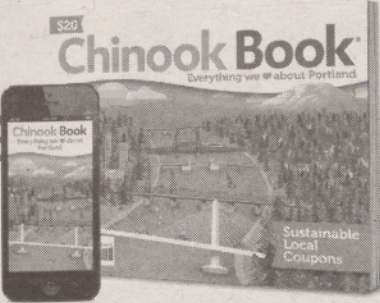
Working in partnership with providers, community health centers and social service agencies to serve people on the Oregon Health Plan, Health Share is building a more accessible and coordinated care system throughout the Tri County area.

503-416-8090 | www.healthshareoregon.org

Together we are health share
Health Share of Oregon

The new Chinook Book is here!

 **Chinook Book**
Everything we @ about Portland

Get yours today and help the sustainable economy grow

Featuring poetry from our Art Partner, Street Roots

Housing matters #MyHomePDX

