

# Dances with Snakes???

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## Mission to the Crows

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### Saturday - August 12, 1995

Well, it's that time of year again. As a member of the Christian Chiropractors Association, this will be my third mission to the Crow Reservation in four years, with the Forward Edge Missions. My flight from Newark to Montana leaves at 8:25 A.M.

I find that whenever I leave on a mission of service like this, obstacles never fail to flair up. This year is no exception. The driver that usually takes me to the airport was on vacation, but he scheduled a "covering" driver, Sammy, to get me there. When I called last week to confirm my ride, I was told that he lost my paperwork and was glad that I called. He said he would be at my house by 6:00 a.m. When he wasn't here by 6:30 a.m., I called him and was told he wasn't coming. He did send a substitute, Mike, Driver #2, who showed up at 6:45. It was a miracle we got to the airport on time. Since I had a portable treatment table, a five foot bag of gear and clothing, I thought that it would be a good idea to check the baggage "curbside". The Northwest agent calmly informed me that he could not check my luggage because I had already checked in. I know that interesting things often happen to me, but I would have certainly remembered checking in! He would not discuss the matter and I had to bring everything into the airport. When I arrived at the ticket counter, I told my story to the lady at the desk. I jokingly concluded my tale of woe by saying, "if there are two people on this plane with my name, then I am the one with the first class seat". (I actually had a preassigned seat in coach.) She smiled and calmly stated, "You 're right, Dr. Sommer," and handed me my boarding pass. I did not realize, until I got to the gate, that she had upgraded me to first class.

I arrived in Billings, Montana. There was a great reunion at the airport between former mission team members and the members of our team who were to visit the Crow Reservation for the first time. Everyone was exhausted, but not sleepy, because of the excitement and anticipation.

My first patient of the week 11:00 p.m., as well as my very good friend, John Other Medicine, (*follow the Indian names*) shows up, (1:00 a.m., *NY Time*), for his Chiropractic adjustment. I have not yet slept for 20 hours.

### Sunday - August 13, 1995

**5:50 a.m.** I wake up. This is my best first night's sleep in three years at the Reservation. I wonder - am I still on Eastern time?

**11:30 a.m.** We were invited to the Sunday service at the Four Square Church. Pastor Kenneth Pretty-on-Top (*Indian name*) welcomed our 18-member team to the Crow Reservation. The Crow members of the church were, as always, exceptionally hospitable. Many of them remembered me from my previous visits. After the service, our team invited the church members to join us for lunch. During lunch, one of the Crow women told me that her son, Justin, was to have his first "Give Away Dance" on Thursday. I understood this was a "coming of age ritual" in their traditional culture and commented that she must be very happy. She then invited me to join the family and dance with them in the arena. Not being a very good dancer in my own culture, not wanting to jeopardize my relationship with the Crows, and not having the proper Indian clothing, I tried to tactfully retreat. However, Forward Edge emphasized personal evangelism and this invitation was a high honor. I graciously accepted her warm invitation to join in her family's celebration and dance, Native American style, in front of thousand of Indians, most of whom were not Christian.

John Paul Other Medicine has invited me to join his family at their campsite tonight. I have a special friendship with John and his wife Elizabeth, and their children. It is so good to be here again. I really love these people. I am starting to feel like I am more a part of a reunion (the actual meaning of Pow-Wow) than a Christian mission. I realize I am here for both purposes.

Everyone I see at the campsite remembers me. The Crow culture emphasizes good natured joking with a lot of laughing. I, of course, am the brunt of many of their jokes. The atmosphere is filled with much warmth. I am family and I have returned.

The more time I spend with the Crow and share their culture, the more I feel an ache in my belly when I learn of the history between our two people. But I am here to share Christ and He unites us into one body.

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## Monday - August 14, 1995

**6:00 a.m.** I survived my first night in the “*Pent-house*.” That is what I call my tent. I am not a “happy camper.” I like things — like beds, sheets, toilets, air-conditioning, etc. For me, this is the hardest part of the mission. This is the part that makes my trip a sacrifice to God as a thank you for sending His Son to die for me. After breakfast and our morning meeting, I pick a room adjacent to the main sanctuary of the church and set up my Chiropractic Clinic. By afternoon, I am not too busy yet. I take advantage of the time to have a good, lengthy conversation with Doug, our team leader. Doug’s wife, Elaine, is responsible for keeping us well nourished. She is the main reason why I never lose weight when I come here. Elaine is a “*Kitchen Magician*” and I thank God she only supervises my food intake 10 days a year.

Later that night Bob, from Kentucky, and I talk with John Other Medicine at his campsite. John has a depth of wisdom that becomes apparent when he speaks in his quiet, short sentence syntax. He is a man of few, but well-chosen words.

John told me that I will always have a place to stay and food to eat anytime I visit his family. Tuesday, I finally had a chance to talk with Kenneth Pretty-On-Top and renew my deep friendship with him. Kenneth is the pastor of the church here and I refer to him as “*The Moses of the Crow People*” because he is leading his people to the promised land, heaven. We discussed many things, but three items that Kenneth tells me stand out:

1. There are no homeless Indians on the reservation because their culture requires that families help their relatives. No one is without shelter. Their culture does not allow it.

2. No one goes without food because the tribe makes sure that everyone eats.

3. There are no orphanages on the reservation because families take in the children of relatives who have met with tragedy. It is required by their culture.

About 1:00 a.m. Wednesday morning, Bob, Jennifer, Jackie, and I took a ride in Bob’s rented car up the mountain to view the Crow encampment from two miles away. There were no artificial lights and the beauty of thousands of Tee-Pee’s in the moonlight was indescribable. There were also a lot more stars in the Montana sky at night than New Jersey. On the way back to camp, we were unable to find the road because it was so dark. A Crow Tribal Police car came up the mountain to make sure nothing was wrong. (*They had seen our headlights.*) As the Crow Policeman questioned Bob, I started saying under my breath, but loud enough for Jennifer and Jackie to hear, “*Help me, they are kidnap-*

*ping me.*” When the officer left, we were laughing so hard that we almost busted a gut, literally. The joy of the Spirit sure had our endorphins pumped up.

Many more patients showed up on Wednesday afternoon. Because of a practical joke on me my first year here, my “*Indian Name*” is “*Dances with Snakes.*” A story in itself involving snake rattles and me running out of my tent. Crow patients are stopping by the church and asking if “*Snakes*” is here to give them a Chiropractic treatment. One older woman came to the Clinic complaining of headaches and neck pain. When a cervical adjustment alleviated her discomfort, she wanted to know what kind of “*magic*” was in my hands. She told me that I was a magic man with magic in my hands. Just then, Pastor Pretty-On-Top stopped by. After a lengthy conversation and witness, we prayed with this lady and she accepted Christ, the Source of all power on earth and in the heavens.

This evening we had a BBQ at the Pretty-On-Top house. Kenneth asked me to pray “*in your native language*” for everyone. Being a Jewish Christian, I understood that he was asking me to pray in Hebrew. I said the Shema, which is found in Deuteronomy 6:4. Now my name is “*Rabbi Snakes.*”

An interesting thing happened at the BBQ. In the Crow culture, if someone indicates that they want something of yours - you give it to them, and vice versa. I have seen many gifts exchanged this way. Knowing that I do not like insects, Hannah Pretty-On-Top (Ken’s wife) admired my battery powered, ultrasonic insect repeller. I gave it to her. Several hours later, when the bugs came out, Hannah’s daughter came over to me and said, “*My mother said this is yours.*” She placed the repeller in my hand. I realized that Hannah was joking and testing our friendship at the same time. When I left at the end of the week, I gave it to her for good.

Doug, our team leader, informed me Thursday morning that Randy-Pretty-On-Top had invited Bob and me to join him in a sweat Tee-Pee Thursday for a “*sweat*”. I am concerned about the scheduling because I don’t want to miss my invitation to dance at Justin’s give away dance.

Out of desperation I had to use one of those portable toilets. Doug and his son, Michael amused themselves by locking me into it. Since I was standing, it was easy punching and kicking my way out of it. Of course, my new name of this evening is “*Stuck in Toilet.*”

## Friday - August 18, 1995

Well, I danced last night with Justin’s family. I really felt honored. In my three trips here, I do not re-

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call anyone from our team being invited to share in a “*coming of age*” ritual. I was very nervous. Everyone involved was dressed in traditional native clothing and I was in my traditional blue jogging suit. Boy, did I stick out!! Even the Indians were asking in disbelief, “*Are you really going to dance in the arena?*” When the big moment came, about 11:00 p.m., under the lights like a night time ball game, we lined up like a wedding party about to make an entrance. The loud singing and drum beats started. I kept to the steps that I was taught. Half-way through the dance the music changed. A tall, young man in beautiful traditional clothing dancing next to me said that he did not know the steps of this new music. I looked at him and replied, “*I hope your not asking me, I just got here.*” I just continued my basic two-step beat. After the dance, Jus tin’s proud grandma looked at me and calmly said, “*you are a young man, come help me*”. So I followed her to her car to get the gifts that her family was giving away and carried them into the arena for her. Two thoughts occurred to me: 1) I was welcomed like family: and 2) I was expected to help those older than me as was the Crow custom.

Today, when John Other Medicine arrived for his treatment, he was jokingly shouting that the rain from this early morning was my fault. When I asked him how could I have caused the rain, he replied, “*You did the wrong step last night in the arena*”. John keeps asking if I will return next year because he really likes it when I come here. I assured him that I have every intention of returning, but that of course is up to God! When we got back to the camp site I saw John and as I greeted him, he lowered his rifle (*he is a decorated Vietnam war veteran-a real warrior, and is a member of the honor guard*) and he shot blanks at me. I dropped to the ground and yelled, “*OK, I’ll come back next year.*”

Today one of the most amazing events of my spiritual life occurred. I had just finished treating patients and was waiting for the rest of my teammates to return from their tasks of the day. A young man and his new wife were traveling through on their honeymoon and I greeted them outside the Church. This is what he said to me, “*I am Bruce and this is my new wife Stacey. I am the Pastor of a Church in Iowa. We are on our honeymoon. We prayed and asked the Lord where to donate our wedding money and He told us to come to this church, (Four Square) at the Crow Reservation. I didn t even know that it was here.*” Well, after I picked myself up off the ground, I introduced the couple to Doug and Elaine, our leaders, and Pastor Kenneth Pretty-On-Top. Bruce and Stacey spent the next two days with our team and were a real blessing. I will never forget this.

I did not realize how close of a relationship I was building with Joe and Laura Bear Cloud until they asked me if I was married. When I replied that I wasn’t, they

smiled at each other. My first year here, one of the local people told me that he would “*find me a good Indian woman to keep me here.*”

I have been treating so many patients and meeting so many people that, as I walked down the street earlier today, a van drove by and the driver yelled out, “*Hi Ya Snakes!*”

We are about to start our Forward Edge re-entry session which formally concludes the mission. This is always emotional. It is a personal evaluation of how this week affected us and what each of us gave and received. It is also time to say formal good-byes to each other and exchange photos, etc. The Crow do it the right way. They do not have a word for goodbye because it is too painful. After the re-entry meeting, we are “Free “ to spend our time as we like until we all leave over the next 36-48 hours to return home. Many of us still stay together as a team and spend our time at the rodeo or Pow-Wow. I plan on spending my day with the Other Medicines and Pretty-On-Tops at the campsite. I take my portable treatment table with me to help people at the campsite that never make it to the Church. On Saturday night Doug, Bob, Bruce, and I enjoyed a “sweat lodge” with Randy Pretty-On-Top. Two, forty-five minute sessions in heat, hot enough for your hair to catch fire, lying naked with your face in the dirt. Randy was telling us stories his grandfather told him. Interspersed were prayers of thanksgiving and blessings. This is a spiritually, as well as physically, cleansing experience. We got back to the Tee-Pee about 8:30 p.m. and I had to take a two hour nap so mat I would be awake enough to enjoy, for one more night, me singing, dancing, music, and drum beats that typically continue until 2:00 a.m.

Interestingly, people are still calling the church and asking for an appointment with “*Snakes.*”

As I started to dismantle my tent, I forgot that Kenny, Barren and Justin were sleeping in it. That gave everyone one more laugh to see the tent start moving on its own.

I felt particularly at home on the Crow Reservation this year. To have the local people referring to me by my “*Indian name - Snakes*”, was a uniquely warming experience.

As in the past, I leave with a strong sense that no matter what you give on a mission trip, you receive much more. I am convinced that it is some unwritten spiritual law.

Dr. Sommer just returned from another mission to the Crow Indians in August of 1997. This year, after developing the lasting relationships with these people, the “Other Medicine” family adopted him as an official son with a special ceremony. Look for an account of that blessed event in future issues.