



Jodi Rave

Native News

Friday, April 10 2009

Missoulian.com

Investors sought for film about Native sisters

By JODI RAVE of the Missoulian

The Indian burial ground bears the names of Wyandot people who died in Kansas in the mid-1800s, names such as Lewis Greyeyes, Cora Zane, John Cornstalk, Daniel Peacock, Catherine Bearskin,

Eliza Conley.

It took 65 years and three Native sisters to keep the Wyandot buried after the cemetery was illegally purchased by Kansas City, Kan., officials.

"I've long thought one of the untold stories of Indian Country is that so many of the extraordinary things we've done in tribal communities have been led by strong Native women who have been the source of perseverance, the source of strength, not only in the family, but in leadership and pushing a pro-Native agenda," said Keith Harper, a Washington, D.C., lawyer and executive producer for a film about the three Wyandot sisters.

In 2009, the Wyandot National Cemetery provides a backdrop for the film "Whispers Like Thunder," a story of how Lyda, Helena and Ida Conley used double-barrel shotguns, the law and perseverance to uphold treaty rights, ensuring the bones of their relatives remained buried in the cemetery and untouched by construction workers.

By 1907, upward of 600 Wyandot were buried in what was then known as the Huron Indian Cemetery in Kansas City, a burial site for the family and relatives of three sisters. When the city announced the burial ground would be moved, the Conley sisters immediately moved to protect the graves. They built a shack and wielded axes for nearly four years to protect the graves.

One of the sisters, Lyda, went on to earn a law degree to defend the tribe's treaty rights, becoming the first woman ever to argue a case before the U.S. Supreme Court.

Harper, named one of the 50 Most Influential Minority Lawyers in America, is working with actor Sir Ben Kingsley's British production company, SBK Pictures, to draw investors to "Whispers Like Thunder."

"At this juncture, we're making an entre in Indian Country," said Harper. "When I read the script, I thought it would be exciting for tribes to support this story. All too often, stories aren't told effectively. They aren't told in an authentic manner by the communities that it implicates."



Kingsley

Jodi Rave Continued...



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While Kingsley is producing the film, he is also slated to play Charles Curtis, the first and only Native American to serve as a U.S. vice president (to President Herbert Hoover). Curtis was a U.S. senator when the Conley sisters were fighting to protect the graves.

“It is my hope in producing this film to illuminate the noble struggle the Conley sisters had to endure to preserve their ancestors' sacred burial ground and legacy,” Kingsley said in a statement.

Producer Luis Moro of Los Angeles is working with Kingsley to tell the story of the Wyandot, an epic journey of tribal relocation in the 1850s that led the Conley sisters to the U.S. Supreme Court.

“It is with great pride that we have championed this film,” said Moro. “We expect it to be Hollywood's first major A-list feature film bringing a great uplifting, empowering story about Native Americans to the big screen.”

The journey to save the burial grounds in Kansas City finally ended when it was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1972.

“It's about losing battles and winning the war,” said Erik Huey, also one of the film's executive producers. “When you look at the Conley sisters, they used all the resources they had. They put themselves through law school and went to the Supreme Court. You not only have the first woman arguing before the Supreme Court, but it's the first Native woman.”

At the turn of the 20th century, the Wyandot women were “as powerless as powerless went,” said Huey. Still, “they refused to take no for an answer.”

Huey, who is listed as one of Hollywood Reporters' most influential entertainment lawyers, is working with Harper to attract investors and Native support for the film.

“Too often we see movies without a lot of Native involvement,” said Harper. “Those movies speak for themselves. They don't tell the story our communities find authentic. It would be a tragedy if that was true here because it's such a compelling story.”

Read Jodi Rave's blog at BuffaloPost.net