

Burial site dedicated for Native remains

By Robert Rhodes
Mennonite Weekly Review

CLINTON, Okla. — A building and burial plot that will hold the remains of Native Americans reclaimed from museums and other institutions was dedicated April 1 on the grounds of the Cheyenne Cultural Center. The dedication was part of the Mennonite Central Committee-supported Return to the Earth initiative.

Center executive director Lawrence Hart, a Southern Cheyenne peace chief and pastor of Koinonia Mennonite Church, said the plot is the first of its kind to be dedicated in the United States to receive “culturally unidentifiable” Indian remains. In addition to MCC, more than 70 faith-based organizations are part of the Return to the Earth effort.

According to Hart, more than 100,000 Native American remains, most of them taken for scientific study or looted from 19th-century battle sites, await identification and burial in consecrated ground.

Under the federal Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990, or NAGPRA, museums and other repositories must disclose the remains in their collections and cooperate with efforts to return them to tribal land.

“Respect for human beings is of critical importance,” said Sherry Hutt, who oversees NAGPRA implementation for the U.S. Department of the Interior.

Though some still claim the remains are needed for the scientific data they can yield, Hutt disagrees.

“Where are the fruits of the science that has occurred over the past 200 years on public lands?” Hutt said during a panel discussion April 1 as part of the “Journey from Darlington” conference organized by the Mennonite Church USA Historical Committee. “The time has come to publish your data and move forward. . . .

“Let the people go home. That’s what NAGPRA is all about — giving place to those who have no place to go. . . . The law calls them ‘culturally unidentifiable,’ but the ancestors know who they are.”

Erica Littlewolf, a Northern Cheyenne from Montana and Return to the Earth staff member, said the project is part of Hart’s longtime vision for the repatriation of Indian remains.

Though the effort means re-examining painful events, “we want to acknowledge that history has taken place . . . and go ahead and achieve restorative justice,” Littlewolf said.

In addition to recently publishing a study guide on NAGPRA and repatriation for churches and other faith groups, Return to the Earth also seeks to raise \$200,000 to fund the visitors center and other work. The project also has a Web site at www.rfpusa.org/returntotheearth/index.html.

In future phases, the project will produce an educational video, along with continuing to find and secure burial grounds in other parts of the country. Special muslin cloths and cedar boxes also are needed to hold the remains for burial.

Though it will take years to repatriate most of the remains, “I do this work to honor my ancestors,” Littlewolf said. “We do what we can do now, and then we pass it on.”

Rachel Pannabecker, director of Kauffman Museum in North Newton, Kan., said museums must not only list the Native remains and other historical artifacts in their collections, but help establish “credible provenance” about their history and whether NAGPRA applies to them.

“Return to the Earth is a visionary approach to repatriating,” Pannabecker said. “It goes beyond compliance with the law to offer consolation.”



Southern Cheyenne and Arapaho chiefs bless the foundation for a Return to the Earth visitors center and burial site at the Cheyenne Cultural Center in Clinton, Okla. From left are Edwin Pewo, Sam Hart and Tulane Wilson. Behind them are Harvey Pratt and Donald Eaglenest. — Robert Rhodes/MWR

During the dedication, five Cheyenne and Arapaho chiefs blessed the foundation pad of a new building at the Cheyenne Cultural Center, adjacent to where a circular burial ground will be established in a nearby field. Around the plot, grasses native to the area will be planted and a herd of buffalo grazed, Hart said.

Work will start on the new building when a group of Amish carpenters frames the walls and roof, barn-raising-style. Hart also hopes to attract other church and faith groups, including Jews and Muslims, to take part in the effort.

As an official NAGPRA site, the burial plot will fall under federal jurisdiction and legal oversight, Hart said. This will help ensure the site is preserved, along with the legacy of the people buried there.

"It is really ideal that our ancestors have federal protection," Hart said during the dedication. "We don't want them dug up again. . . . [They are] not out of sight, out of mind."

Hart also acknowledged that reclaiming Native remains will take many years to achieve.

"It's a long process," Hart said. "Likely, it will be continuing when people like myself are no longer around."